University of Alberta

"Life in the Sticks:" Youth Experiences, Risk & Popular Theatre Process

by

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Abstract

"Life in the Sticks," was the title of a Popular Theatre project I facilitated with a group of high school drama students in a rural Alberta community of majority Aboriginal population. Popular Theatre, a process of theatre for personal and social change, became the participatory, performative research method I employed. It was the medium through which students and I portrayed and examined incidents from their lives, investigating their perceptions of their experiences.

Our drama explorations raised issues that students identified as relevant. *"Life in the Sticks,"* was based on their initial claim that their issues were determined by their rural environment. These issues included rule breaking, substance use, risky sex and interpersonal conflict. As they said, "Kids get into all kinds of trouble because they are bored." Our work helped them re-examine some of their beliefs. Ultimately, they claimed their risky behaviour was a matter of personal choice and habit. This attitude had the potential to be empowering, giving them back a sense of agency and control over their lives, but left me wondering what motivated their risky choices.

Students' perceptions helped me reframe the label "at-risk." Used in mainstream literature in education, health care and criminal justice, the label portrays youth, their families and communities as deficient or deviant if they do not conform to society's expectations. My reinterpretation, based on our drama work, highlights youths' agency in choosing to engage in risky behaviour, and the enjoyment they gain from it. I explore the risky or resistant quality of youth behaviour as performative acts with subversive potential to critique schooling practices and undermine unjust social relations. My interpretation includes an autoethnographic inquiry – a collection of artifacts from my youth and the risky stories they elicit.

This study advocates the beliefs and practices of Popular Theatre as an empowering pedagogy for youth and an effective research method. It offers a counter-narrative that interrupts taken-for-granted understandings of youth behaviour to present a more complex picture than one of deviance and deficiency, towards an understanding of youth and risk that more fully reflects their realities and better responds to their needs.

"The accumulation of petty acts can,
rather like snowflakes on a steep mountainside,
set off an avalanche."

Dr. James C. Scott, Yale University
Domination and the Arts of Resistance (1990, p. 192)

This work is dedicated to youth everywhere as they struggle to understand their place in the world, assert their identities and make their voices heard.

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I wish to thank the students who participated in the Popular Theatre project, their school and community. I greatly appreciate the students' openness in sharing aspects of their lives with me. I dedicate this work to youth everywhere in their honour. Above all, I hope that our/my work proves of benefit to them.

I thank the faculty, staff and graduate students in the Department of Secondary Education, University of Alberta. I could not have asked for a more supportive and rigorous environment in which to work. I especially thank my supervisor Dr. jan jagodzinski for the inspiration and encouragement he has given me over the years. I also wish to thank my former supervisor Dr. Joe Norris for helping me find my footing in drama education and arts-based research.

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Introduction

The Research Process

As part of my research, I lived and worked for one month in a rural Alberta community, in which the majority of residents were of Aboriginal descent. I engaged two classes of high school drama students in a Popular Theatre project. As theatre for personal and social change, Popular Theatre draws on participants' experiences to collectively create theatre and engage in discussion of issues through theatrical means (Boal, 1979/74; Prentki & Selman, 2000; Taylor, 2002). The title that emerged for our work was *"Life in the Sticks."* Initially the students felt the issues they faced were determined by the rural environment in which they lived. As they claimed, "Kids get into all kinds of trouble because they are bored." Our drama work helped them re-examine some of their beliefs about issues they identified as relevant, and provided insight into their experiences.

My research was motivated by my previous experiences working with so called "at-risk" youth in various educational settings - in two inner-city high schools, a youth drop in centre, a young offender facility and two Northwest Territories community schools, teaching or using drama in a variety of ways. On several occasions, youth told me that they did not like the label "at-risk." My interest in the categorization was to better understand the experiences of youth that may define them as "at-risk," and the implications for youth labelled "at-risk." Based on youths' response to the label and a review of literature on "at-risk youth," I saw a need to re-frame the label to include the perspectives of youth themselves (Roman, 1996). As a drama educator, I saw the Popular Theatre process as a possible pedagogical approach and a participatory research method (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Kidd & Byram, 1978; McTaggart, R., 1997; Park, P. et al., 1993), to work with youth to critically explore their lived experiences. The questions that guided my study were: *What are the perceptions of youth regarding their experiences that may deem them "at risk"? How can Popular Theatre, as pedagogy and as research, be used to explore youth experiences?* This dissertation examines the experiences of the youth with whom I worked as represented in our drama work with the intention of better understanding the experiences of youth deemed "at-risk," and the process of doing Popular Theatre to draw out and explore youths' perceptions. This study has provided me the opportunity to examine my engagement with Popular Theatre towards better practice in the future.

Knowing that statistically I was likely to find fewer "at-risk" youth in majority White, middle-class, suburban Edmonton schools (Alberta Learning, 2001), and having previously worked in inner-city contexts, I opted for a rural Alberta setting, which turned out to be of majority Aboriginal population. I use the term "Aboriginal" throughout this dissertation to be inclusive, to refer to youth belonging to racial/cultural groups indigenous to the Alberta/Northwest Territories region where I worked including people of the First Nations: Dene, Cree, Inuit, and those of mixed First Nations heritage (Dene/Inuit, Dene/Cree), as well as youth of the Métis Nation. The majority of families in the community where I conducted my research were of Cree ancestry.

While I did not seek to work with Aboriginal youth specifically, the tragic reality of Aboriginal youth in Alberta, as being most often labelled "at-risk," presented itself. I interrogate the correlation between being an "at-risk" youth and being Aboriginal in Part III of this dissertation. Along with other ethical concerns, I problematize my choice of research site and my social location as non-Aboriginal in relation to the research in Part V. While the Popular Theatre project *"Life in the Sticks"* did not explicitly address "at-riskness," it certainly spoke to this topic. The stories students told, the scenes we created and animated were about boredom, rule-breaking, substance use, risky sex and interpersonal conflict.

The time that has passed since I conducted the Popular Theatre project with students has provided fertile space for ideas to incubate and mature. Time has provided the opportunity to add to my pool of knowledge and experience on which to draw in the interpretation of the drama work with students. In my arts-based interpretive process serendipitous connections were made, insights came to light, methods and forms emerged as they became applicable. The product of this process, as represented here, strays somewhat from the linear dissertation format more common to Faculties of Education. In keeping with the theme of *risk* permeating this study of risky youth behaviour, my dissertation takes a risky approach in pushing the boundaries of both form and content, offering alternative directions to doing and theorizing research.

In the year following the time I spent with students, I wrote a series of scripted descriptions or "ethnodramatic vignettes" (Saldaña, 2003) based on my journal/field notes, audio and video tapes we made, and students' journals, depicting what I considered salient moments during our work together. Of the hours we spent working on *"Life in the Sticks,"* I scripted sixteen instances in all. These scripts focused on the stories students told, the devising process, the scenes we created, animated and performed, as well as other drama activities and the ensuing discussions in which we engaged. The scripts are for the most part transcribed from audio/video tapes and/or re-created from descriptions in my journals/fieldnotes, as such they are partly fictionalized (Banks & Banks, 1998) for ethical and practical, writerly purposes. They are self-conscious constructions to meet the needs of the research. While specific details do not always represent precisely what happened, I aimed to remain true to the substance of our work, and tried to capture the spirit of the interactions depicted, to the extent that this is possible in a re-presentational form. I was careful to preserve details significant to my interpretation, such as reference to the phrase "for the rush" which one student used to describe his motivation for risk-taking. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that my choice of moments to script and my choice of scripts to examine in this dissertation make the work inherently partial as any interpretive work is (Clandinin & Connelley, 1994).

The scripting process already involved a level of interpretation. In my subsequent interpretive work, I drew on these ethnodramatic vignettes, as subcultural re-presentations (Saldaña, 1999) or re-creations of students' (and my) lived experiences - instances of performed culture in action (Fabian, 1990), to examine what we did and the students' responses to it. I include excerpts from these scripts throughout the dissertation to talk about the work with students. I also want the scripts, to some extent, to speak for themselves (Saldaña, 2003) in that they allow students' voices to emerge more authentically and preserve more of the dynamics and context of our discussions than other written forms would have allowed. The names of individuals in the scripts are code names that students gave themselves. In some cases, I adapted the code names for practical purposes; for example, I shortened the code name "Two Horses Humping" to "Horse."

In the pages that follow, I highlight several of the scenes students created based on the stories they told, and the work we did around them. Students' scenes included *"The Bus Trip,"* about a group of students who were caught drinking alcohol on a school bus trip the previous year. I draw on this scene as a good example of the kind of youth risk-taking behaviour my study explores. I also highlight a scene called *"Friends,"* students' favourite scene about conflict in friendship relationships, and *"It's Just a Joke,"* about sexist humour. *"A Matter of Choice"* depicts an audio taped interview I conducted with students reflecting on our work. These were the instances of our work together that generated the most interest and discussion amongst students and I. Other scripted descriptions of scenes, activities and/or discussions are briefly excerpted or referred to in the dissertation including: *"Introductions,"* recounting our first session together, *"Graffiti Wall,"* about a brainstorming activity we did, *"I'm Bored,"* a scene about being bored, *"Talking to My Beer Can,"* a scene about inner conflict over alcohol use, and *"Can I Bum a Smoke?"* about tobacco addiction. Several other scripted descriptions did not find their way into this dissertation. *"Have you Heard about Betty?"* for example, a scene about gossip and risky sex, was hesitantly taken up by students, not yielding much interest and not addressed in this work.

I made use of the Popular Theatre work with students, where we together explored students' perceptions of their lived experiences, as the first phase of my research process – a participatory (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Kidd & Byram, 1978; McTaggart, R., 1997; Park, P. et al., 1993), critically reflexive ethnographic method (Carspecken, 1996; Foley, 2002; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). Throughout the dissertation when speaking about the participatory nature of the drama work we did, which is particularly meaningful in that it gave the students the opportunity to share and speak about their experiences, I often refer to the collective drama work using the possessive pronoun "our." Other ways of representing the participatory relationship between myself, students and the work seemed inadequate. The pronoun "my" (my work with students) wrongly suggests my ownership of the project; "their" (their work) denies my influence on the process, while the indefinite article "the" (the work with students or the work we did) disconnects the work from "us," the students and I. The pronoun "our" appropriately acknowledges and respects our collective ownership of and participation in *"Life in the Sticks."*

In the second phase of my research process, I made use of various ethnographic approaches to inform my interpretation our Popular Theatre work. I used a surrealist (Clifford, 1988) ethnographic form, a postmodern approach to ethnography (Tyler, 1986), to reflect on and represent my experience of doing research. Through the lens of "at-risk," I engaged in a discourse analysis

(Fairclough, 1992) of some of my scripted descriptions to query students' responses to our work. I used autobiographical narrative (Clandinin, & Connelly, 2000) and autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), including a collection of artifacts (Slattery, 2001), to examine my own "at-risk" experiences as a youth. In keeping with the socially critical tradition of Popular Theatre, based on what the students presented, my interpretation of "at-risk" or risky youth behaviour advocates on behalf of youth against ways of viewing youth behaviour and oppressive social structures that put and/or define them as "at-risk."

I acknowledge the problem of speaking about "youth" as though it were a coherent category, given individuals' multiple and shifting identities and contexts (Yuval-Davis, 1997). I do not presume to speak for or about all youth or even some youth in any comprehensive way. Rather, I am interested in better understanding patterns in youth behaviour that I have identified based on years of working with youth and on my own experiences as a transgressive youth. The category "youth" facilitates discussion on their behalf, which would otherwise not be possible. As a group in society that is marginalized, not often consulted regarding the policies that affect them, speaking on their behalf or allowing their voices to be heard is warranted. I use the term "at-risk" even more hesitantly, even though I do so in the context of problematizing it. I explore the ethical implications of the act of labelling in more depth in Part V.

The Popular Theatre process in which students and I engaged contributed to our greater understanding of youth experiences. I have come to appreciate

Popular Theatre as a pedagogical approach and research method – a way of working with youth and a way of making meaning.

The Paper Format

This dissertation takes the form of a collection of scholarly articles, nine in all, each addressing distinct aspects of the research. I chose to adapt the traditional five-chapter dissertation form in favour of a publishable paper format, with each paper readable on its own. The paper format necessitates *abundant repetition* as I set the scene anew for each article. Each paper provides an overview of the study while expanding on a particular aspect. Unfortunately, for those who read this dissertation as a whole, the repetition is of course redundant. Based on my own experiences of reading dissertations, however, I believe this document will be more accessible in the long run to future readers who will more than likely read just a paper or two. Ultimately my decision to employ a publishable paper format was based on the academy's current demand for refereed publication even at the master's and doctoral levels. My paper format dissertation serves such a scholarly and expeditious purpose.

The articles are addressed to academic audiences in one or more of the following fields: drama/theatre, performance studies, art/drama/theatre education, curriculum studies, youth issues, social theory, cultural studies and qualitative methodology. These articles cover much the same ground as any dissertation: description, theoretical framework, literature review, methodology, findings, ethics and concluding thoughts. At the latest revision of this introduction, all nine papers have been submitted for publication. Paper 6 in Part III, *Unearthing*

Personal History: Autoethnography and Artifacts Inform Research on Youth Risk Taking, has already been published in The Journal of Social Theory in Art Education. Paper 7 in Part IV, *Popular Theatre: Empowering Pedagogy for Youth,* has been accepted for publication in Youth Theatre Journal. Paper 8 in Part V, *Entangled in the Sticks: Ethical Conundrums of Popular Theatre as Pedagogy & Research,* has been accepted for publication in Qualitative Inquiry. Read together in this dissertation the papers provide an overview of the research process and my interpretation of it.

In Part I - In the Sticks, I refer to the title of our Popular Theatre project *"Life in the Sticks"* to describe my experience "in the Sticks" - the first phase of the research doing Popular Theatre with students in the rural community. Paper 1, *Thirty Days "In the Sticks:" Traversing the Postmodern Research Landscape,* is a postmodern ethnography (Tyler, 1986) in the form of a "surrealist collage" (Clifford, 1988). In a play of fonts and formats to indicate voices of others and the multiple voices of myself, with fragments of narrative interspersed and juxtaposed with poetry, "found" text, journal excerpts and photographs, the paper describes my experience of doing the research – the time I spent "in the Sticks," my interactions with students and the community. The arts-based/collage form evokes a sense of the experience, the place, the rural locale, the land, the inquiry space, my intrapsychic space, and how these inform the research.

In Part II – Research Methodology, paper 2, *Exploring Risky Youth Experiences: Popular Theatre as a Participatory, Performative Research Method,* discusses the Popular Theatre project as a research method. The paper details the ideological and epistemological roots of Popular Theatre (Boal, 1979/74; Prentki & Selman, 2000; Taylor, 2002) and links Popular Theatre with traditions in participatory research (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Kidd & Byram, 1978; McTaggart, R., 1997; Park, P., et al., 1993), and arts-based/performed ethnographic approaches (Conquergood, 1998; Denzin, 2003; Fabian, 1990; Turner & Turner, 1982). With reference to *"Life in the Sticks,"* including excerpts from my scripted descriptions, the paper shows how our Popular Theatre process helped students explore their experiences and examine their beliefs, which in turn helped me reframe the notion "at-risk" to include the perceptions of youth. Popular Theatre is shown to be an effective research method in the new insights and critical understandings it yielded (Denzin, 1997).

Paper 2 focuses on the Popular Theatre phase of my research. The ethnographic approaches that I employed in the second phase of my research, the interpretive phase, are discussed briefly here and in more detail elsewhere. I discuss my approach to postmodern ethnography (Tyler, 1986) in paper 1, and my use of discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992), autobiographical narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and authoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) in three different papers in Part III.

Part III – Reconceptualizing "At-Risk" is comprised of a cluster of four articles exploring the concept "at-risk." This part of the dissertation gives weight to the issues that emerged from our Popular Theatre process and my subsequent interpretive process. My focus in this part of the dissertation is on the concept "at-risk" rather than the dramatic form, the Popular Theatre process. A focus on issues, I believe, is appropriate to the intent of Popular Theatre, its efficacy in the world over aesthetic considerations, as Popular Theatre makes use of drama as a medium for the purpose of exploring a community's issues (Prentki & Selman, 2000).

Paper 3, the first in Part III, *From At-Risk to Risk-taking: A Review of Literature*, problematizes the portrayal in mainstream literature of "at-risk" youth as deficient and deviant (Fine, 1986; Hixson, & Tinzmann, 1990; National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1985), considers social structural conditions that put youth "at-risk" (Apple, 1995; Giroux, 1992; McLaren, 1998; Willis, 1977), and suggests alternative ways of viewing risky youth behaviour, reframing "at-risk" as risky or risk-taking behaviour. The alternative perspectives presented acknowledge youths' agency in choosing to engage in risky behaviour, the enjoyment or benefit youth gain from risk-taking (Anderson et al., 1993; Lopes, 1993; Lyng, 1993), and the resistant qualities inherent such behaviour (Apple, 1995; Giroux, 1992; Willis, 1977), while still maintaining a concern for the real dangers involved in risk-taking behaviour.

Paper 4, the second article in Part III, *Reframing At-risk: Popular Theatre Elicits Youth Perceptions of their Risky Behaviour,* reframes the notion "at-risk" based on the drama work students and I did together. In a discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992) of salient moments during our work, as portrayed in excerpts from the scripted descriptions I wrote, this paper draws on critical, postmodern (Caputo, 1997; Giroux, 1992; Lyotard, 1984) and psychoanalytic theories (Copjec, 1994; Bowie, 1991, Žižek, 1994) amongst others, to query students' responses. The moments under analysis explore how students identify themselves, how they perceive their behaviour, students' responses to their risky experiences including an instance of rule-breaking depicted in *"The Bus Trip,"* their reflection on *"Life in the Sticks"* and their response to the label "at-risk."

Papers 5 and 6, the third and fourth papers in the "at-risk" cluster, are autoethnographic inquiries (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). The topics for these papers emerged when I came to the realization, or could no longer deny, that my interest in studying "at-risk" was based, in part, on my desire to better understand my own risky experiences as a youth. Through autoethnography I explore my deep personal connection to the research, which came fully to light only during the process itself. The first paper in this couplet, paper 5, *When Autobiography and Research Topics Collide: Two Risky School Dance Stories,* recounts two risky school dance stories. The first story, set in 1999, describes a direct encounter I had with risky youth behaviour during the time I spent in the community conducting my research. I found a backpack containing alcohol outside the school dance, which I was helping to supervise. That experience reminded me of an incident from my youth back in 1979. The second school dance story recounts my 1979 incident - a car accident on my way to a school dance. This paper examines the way my personal history affected my research and my response to youth behaviour.

The second paper in the autoethnographic couplet, paper 6, *Unearthing Personal History: Autoethnography & Artifacts Inform Research on Youth Risk Taking*, describes the unearthing or re-collection of a number of artifacts from my youth (Slattery, 2001), including my friends' comments written in my yearbook, my grade 12 sociology project on parent-teen conflict, a one-act play I wrote about two rebellious young men, and a date book recording illicit incidents in the lives of my friends and I. I discuss the artifacts and the stories they elicit in a cultural self-reading (Ang, 1994) of my experiences that sheds light on what the students and the theory were revealing. My autobiographical work is intended as an ethical act (Fine, 1994). As I invited students to tell stories of their experiences, I feel an obligation to also share mine.

Altogether, the papers in Part III present a critique of the label "at-risk," of schooling at a structural level, the society in which the school system is rooted, and the way youth behaviour is taken-for-granted in mainstream thought. Part III presents a counternarrative (Foucault, 1977) of "at-risk" that advocates on behalf of youth, who in an alternative light which includes youth perceptions, are revealed as a marginalized group in society.

In Part IV – The Pedagogical Potential of Popular Theatre, paper 7, *Popular Theatre: Empowering Pedagogy for Youth*, explores the pedagogical beliefs and practices that make Popular Theatre a powerful pedagogical process (Boal, 1992; Kidd, 1984; Freire, 1988). With examples from our project *"Life in the Sticks,"* including excerpts from the scripted descriptions I wrote, the paper shows how our Popular Theatre process helped students re-examine their beliefs and arrive at new understandings. Despite some limitations of doing this kind of work in a school context, Popular Theatre is presented as a potentially empowering pedagogical approach to drama education with youth.

Part V – Ethical Considerations, is comprised of two papers. The first, paper 8, *Entangled in the Sticks: Ethical Conundrums of Popular Theatre as Pedagogy & Research* discusses a number of ethical dilemmas that burdened me throughout the research process. My dilemmas include problems surrounding the category "youth" (Yuval-Davis, 1997); the act of labelling and the label "at-risk" (National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1985); the problem of speaking for or about the "Other" (Alcoff, 1991; Fine, 1994); difficulties in representing and interpreting our participatory research (Maguire, 1993); questions of quality (Denzin, 1997; Finley, 2003; Lather, 1986); the ethics of raising potentially difficult issues in the classroom (Felman, 1992; Markham, 1998); and the challenges of doing Popular Theatre in a school context. I concede that such ethical entanglements cannot be undone by writing them away, but hope that reflecting on such dilemmas will lead me and others more ethical practice in the future.

In paper 8, I also make apology for the peripheral way in which this research addresses the very serious issue of justice for Aboriginal people in this province and country. While Aboriginal issues are touched upon throughout the dissertation, in our improvised drama work the students focused on their experiences in relation to life in a rural community, not their Aboriginal identity as such. While Aboriginal culture/identity did come up on occasion in our discussion and drama work, this was not offered as a focus for our work. On the one hand, had I given more emphasis to Aboriginal issues in my dissertation, I feel I would not have fully done justice to the perspectives the students expressed.

On the other hand, among the ethical concerns I raise are the possible reasons for the absence of Aboriginal issues in students' portrayals and responses. I question if censorship or students' self-censorship in response to the school context and the majority White teachers at the school, myself included, might have played a part. I question if students felt safe enough in the institutional context to disclose their most difficult stories, particularly to their non-Aboriginal teachers. I also problematize my social location as non-Aboriginal in working with Aboriginal youth around the notion "at-risk" (Fine, et al., 2000).

Paper 9, the second article in Part V and the concluding paper of the dissertation, is entitled *The Ethics & Efficacy of Mimesis in Youth Performance in and out of School.* Here I explore the ethical concerns and the potential effects of mimesis, an aesthetic concept that describes the human faculty for imitating or representing reality (Diamond, 1997). Via historical understandings of the concept (Aristotle, 1996; Benjamin, 1986; Brecht, 1964/57; Plato, 1994) and later reconceptualizations (Conquergood, 1992; Taussig, 1993), I consider the danger of unjustly appropriating the difficult stories of others and ourselves (Salverson, 2001). I also find potential in viewing students' performances, including the students' performances for *"Life in the Sticks,"* and the risky or resistant performative acts in the day-to-day lives of youth, as mimetic (Scott, 1990). There is subversive potential in mimetic excess (Taussig, 1993), the reflexive use of the mimetic faculty in youth behaviour, to critique schooling and undermine unjust social structures.

Overall, this dissertation based on my interpretation of the project *"Life in the Sticks"* attempts to unsettle taken-for-granted beliefs about youth behaviour and the structures of schooling, seeking a more just reality for all youth. It presents Popular Theatre as an empowering pedagogical approach to drama education with youth and an effective participatory and performative research method.

As such, I welcome the reader to engage with the following articles as performative acts in the ongoing struggle for social justice . . .

Throughout this study, I have played many roles. I have played the parts of teacher, Popular Theatre facilitator, researcher, writer and graduate student, with varying degrees of success. A role that I have come to see as infused in all these other roles is that of Boal's (1979/74) facilitator, which he calls the "Joker." At least I like to envision aspects of the Joker in all my other roles . . . What I particularly like about the role of Joker is its critical edge. Based on my experiences playing the Joker, as well as Boal's and others' incarnations, that I have witnessed, the Joker I want to encourage in myself is: the devil's advocate who seeks to leave no question unasked; the wild card for whom no topic is off limits or impervious to critique; the irreverent trickster who plays with "the truth;" the ironic court jester who sees beyond propriety; the grotesque who reflects and critiques the gritty underside of society; the clown who encourages play and enjoyment; the skilled acrobat who plays the balance between safety and risk; the magician who helps create something greater than the sum of its parts; the juggler who carefully considers all the options; and the fool with idealistic hopes for the future. As a teacher working on a Popular Theatre project with students, I played the Joker, but a naïve and inexperienced one with much to learn. It is a challenging role that I continue to strive to enact. In my research and writing, through critical reflection and by pushing against boundaries, I have tried to nurture the Joker in me. It is in my emerging role as Joker here that I guide you through this collection of articles which is my dissertation . . .

Part I – In the Sticks

. . . The first paper in the collection is essentially a descriptive piece. Paper 1, Thirty Days "In the Sticks:" Traversing the Postmodern Research Landscape, experiments with an arts-based means of expression, a textual/visual "surrealist" collage form. I use this form as a way for readers to interact with the experience I describe and with me in a visceral, experiential way . . .

Paper 1: Thirty Days "In the Sticks:" Traversing the Postmodern Research Landscape

As part of my doctoral research, I spent one month living and working in a rural Alberta community, in which the majority of residents were of Aboriginal descent, doing a Popular Theatre project with a group of high school drama students. Popular Theatre, as theatre for personal and social change (Prentki & Selman, 2000), was the medium through which students and I explored their experiences, examined their beliefs and searched for alternative responses. The title of our project was *"Life in the Sticks,"* based on the students' initial claim that their issues were determined by their rural environment. Clearly, the sense of place, the experience of living in a rural community, profoundly influenced how the students' perceived their reality. In keeping with this theme of our Popular Theatre work, I borrowed the metaphor of *"Life in the Sticks,"* to convey my experience of doing the research. I too spent time living "in the sticks." I stayed in the community for one month as I conceptually dwelt in the multiple sites that made up the inquiry space of *"Life in the Sticks."*

The purpose of this text is to elucidate or evoke, to the extent that it is possible, the multi-dimensional, messy, tangled, lived experience that was my research landscape, to allow readers to experience it vicariously through the text as through a work of art. To this end I describe and reflect upon my experience of living and working "in the sticks" for one month, through an arts-based form (Diamond & Mullen, 1999), a postmodern approach to ethnography (Tyler, 1986). Surrealist ethnography (Clifford, 1988) seeks to reveal the workings of the social subconscious by embracing "an aesthetic that values fragments, curious collections, unexpected juxtapositions" (p. 118). Modeled as a collage, my text includes various creative narrative forms (Clandinin & Connelly; 2000), layers of autoethnographic narrative (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), poetry (Brady, 1991; Richardson, 1994), journal/field note excerpts (Van Maanen, 1995), visual narrative/photography (Bach, 1998; Harper, 1987; Collier & Collier, 1986) and snippets of other "found" text (Clifford, 1986) juxtaposed. As a work of art, I want this collage to some extent to speak for itself (Saldaña, 2003).

Unlike traditional ethnography (Geertz, 1960; Mead, 1930; Wolcott, 1973), that tries to make the unfamiliar comprehensible, a surrealist ethnography (Clifford, 1988), through juxtaposition, works at making the familiar strange – defamiliarizing aspects of the everyday. A surrealist ethnography does so to provoke disruption and produce rather than reduce incongruities, in the service of subversive cultural criticism (Clifford, 1986). My surrealist ethnography is also a critical ethnography concerned with the injustices experienced by people in our society and directed towards positive social change (Carspecken, 1996; Denzin, 1997).

From this perspective, my subjectivity (Jackson, 1998), the experiences of the researcher, especially my experiences of participation and empathy, become central to the research process (Clifford, 1986). My collage is a self-reflexive account, not of an objective ethnographic gaze, but of my subjective, embodied, multi-perspectival experience. It includes the sights, sounds, smells and feel of my research encounter "in the sticks," including insights into my subconscious

(Strachey, 1974). It examines the experience from the perspective of my multiple and sometimes contested roles as teacher, Popular Theatre facilitator, researcher and human being. The truths that are revealed are inherently partial. Like Clifford (1986), I cannot tell "the truth," but only what I know. My text represents a particular, contextual, relational instance of cultural production.

In the collage form, which my text models, the cutting and assemblage are part of the message, "the cuts and sutures of the research process are left visible; there is no smoothing over or blending of the works' raw data into a homogeneous representation . . . [leaving] manifest the constructivist procedures of ethnographic knowledge" (Clifford, 1988, p. 146-147). To avoid an authoritative portrayal of a unified, representable reality or a straightforward explanatory discourse, my collage includes a polyphony of voices, my own and others, as well as "found" excerpts that are not fully integrated into any overarching interpretation (Clifford, 1986). In this way, disparate voices, including the voices of my multiple selves, are allowed to speak for themselves. The collage form breaks down the sequential, linear dictates of language, describing an experience of the research landscape that is simultaneous and resists closure.

An emergent theme of *"Life in the Sticks,"* the Popular Theatre work with students, was the predominating effect of the physical geography of the place, the rural environment, on the day-to-day lives of the students. In response, my ethnographic account also centers on the significance of place (Kincheloe & Pinar, 1991). I adopt Norberg-Schulz's (1980) definition of place as our concrete reality, the comprehensive totality of the environment made up of things in our everyday life-world, including the trees, animals, rocks, sky, sun, stars, streets, buildings, people and also our connection to those things. Norberg-Schulz suggests these things are integral to our experience of a place, giving it a unique atmosphere or character. To understand a culture you have to understand the spirit of the place. To experience it as meaningful means to become "friends" with a place (Norberg-Schulz, 1980). To me, this involves learning to understand the place, to live with it as it is, to appreciate its uplifting qualities as well as coming to terms with its limitations.

My text documents my struggle to become friends with the place. In doing so, I draw on Soja's (1989) notion of postmodern geography reasserting a "spatial perspective" in critical social theory. Soja's postmodern geography is a human geography that emphasizes the interrelation between place, time and social being, extending the geographical imagination to look at social production and social practices. As such, I examine the geopolitical and psychological implications of the place and my experience of *"Life in the Sticks."*

A recurring theme in the text is the geopolitics of the place in relation to Aboriginal education. My interest in doing drama with "at-risk" youth, took me to this rural Alberta, mostly Aboriginal community. I previously taught in two Aboriginal communities in the Northwest Territories, where amongst my students were some that might have been deemed "at-risk." Being an Aboriginal youth in the Northwest Territories, I knew, was fraught with challenge and adversity. A number of social challenges including the struggle to come to terms with the terrible legacy of residential schools in Canada, a clash of cultural expectations with dominant society, and the geographical location/isolation made it difficult for students to get an education comparable with mainstream Canada. For my research, I was not particularly looking to work in an Aboriginal community, knowing there were Aboriginal scholars more suited to the task. I did express an interest in working with "at-risk" youth based on my previous teaching experiences and my own experiences as a youth. Tragically, as I was to learn, whether in the inner-city, the criminal justice system or a rural community, being an "at-risk" youth in Alberta correlated to a large degree with being Aboriginal (see also Alberta Learning, 2001; Makokis, 2000).

The community that I visited was not on a reserve, but bordered by reserve land. The majority of the students were of Aboriginal descent; many bused from their homes on reserve. I wrestled with the fear that my research on "at-risk" would feed a stereotype correlating "at-risk" with Aboriginal descent. Nor did I want my research to presume to speak for Aboriginal people, a minority group to which I was Other. Ultimately, however, I determined to face the ethical challenge of investigating "at-risk" in an Aboriginal context. Ironically, the students with whom I worked downplayed their experience of being Aboriginal in *"Life in the Sticks,"* emphasizing instead the effects of the rural environment on their behaviour, eventually acknowledging their own risky choices and habits.

Through reflective narrative inquiry, which I have not included in my study for ethical reasons as the stories making reference to individuals within a context too sensitive for publication, I have interrogated my experiences/interactions with Aboriginal people as I grew up and my experiences teaching in the Northwest Territories, to help me understand how "at-riskness" and Aboriginal descent have come to overlap. I have done so to make a connection between my personal experiences and my research, with the understanding that "we are complicit in the world we study" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.61).

While I do not presume to speak from or for an Aboriginal perspective, I hope that my attentiveness to the environment, in this, my interpretation of my work in a community of majority Aboriginal population, honours the reverence that traditional Aboriginal/Cree epistemology bestows on nature, the land and sense of place (Ermine, 1995; Knudtson & Suzuki, 1992), as I have also come to revere the land. Aboriginal beliefs see human beings as guardians of the land. The concept of place represents the relationship of things to each other - the interconnectedness of the physical world with our metaphysical inner reality. Thus, Silko (1996) begins her book of essays on Native American life with the land. The physical landscape or terrain is central to her stories, becomes a character in her stories, with the people being as much a part of the landscape as the ground upon which they stand. In my ethnography too, the land takes on a life of its own. It becomes a part of my research landscape that is both loathed and cherished as I struggle through the research experience, as my students also expressed loathing and cherishment of the rural environment where they lived in *"Life in the Sticks."*

As our Popular Theatre work revealed, the place was more than just a location (Kincheloe & Pinar, 1991). The title *"Life in the Sticks,"* which emerged from our drama work and discussion, suggested that the place had psychological implications, functioning as a point of orientation and identification (Soja, 1989), albeit partly through rejection. The title aptly described the landscape in the region where the students lived, also known as "the land of small sticks."

At worst, "The Sticks" connoted a poverty of place. Stands of stunted trees, economically unviable, cluttered the landscape, which was dotted with lakes, interspersed with muskeg and scrubby pasture. "The Sticks" represented isolation and confinement, as the land for miles around was mostly impassable, and abandonment, as the remote rural communities in this region suffered the effects of underdevelopment. For the students, "the Sticks" meant nowhere to go and nothing to do, isolation, lack of conveniences, lack of consumer goods and services, and boredom. This lead to kids getting into trouble, risk-taking, substance use, and criminal activity. Ironically, their interpretation of their experiences "in the Sticks" spoke directly to my implicit interest in better understanding the experiences of youth "at-risk."

While students also positively identified with the place, this was not offered for further development in our drama work. Students did talk about a sense of belonging to the place, which must also be acknowledged. They spoke fondly of its peacefulness, a sense of oneness with nature, the freedom and clean air they enjoyed, as well as the pleasures they derived from hunting (bear, moose, ducks) and fishing.

Welcome
to the
Land Of Opportunity
MUNICIPAL DISTRICT

Welcome to the Land of Opportunity

In the collage form, I try to capture a sense of this place, the experience of being in and moving through the place, which was my research site, and the inquiry space that it evoked. The place includes the natural landscape and the social context, the community, as well as the school, the classroom environments and the people within them.

A sense of space also refers to my inner space in relation to the outer place, the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) that is informed as much by everyday life experiences as by the topic of the research and the formal research process. One such everyday experience during my stay in the community that took on special significance was my daily walk with my dog Missy. This ordinary day-to-day activity became more than a routine. It became a ritual that helped me connect with the place and informed my inquiry. It allowed me the time and space to reflect on the day-to-day interactions in the classroom working on *"Life in the Sticks."*

My attachment to Missy and our shared experiences on these walks also became a source of insight. In one recurring layer of autoethnographic narrative, a series of textual fragments threaded throughout the paper represent an hour of "real-time" that occurred towards the end of month I spent in the place – a fretful hour during which I lost my beloved dog. This passage recounts my desperate, breathless search for Missy. Other layers of narrative and inner monologue are similarly fragmented and interspersed throughout.

The story of the collage begins and ends in the pasture next to the bush at the time and in the place I lost my dog, and describes my day-to-day experiences in/of the community. It is told in three distinct authorial voices: my voice as artist/naturalist/philosopher, my academic voice, and my city self out of its element "in the sticks." My teacher voice emerges through a series of excerpts from my daily journals and explores my role as teacher/Popular Theatre facilitator, my interactions with students, classroom practice and the school context. The narrative, in its various voices is indicated by a play of fonts and formats, complemented by photography, poetry and "found" text (Clifford, 1986).

Student voices also speak up throughout the text in various ways – in excerpts from their journals; in scripted excerpts of scenes they created and performed *("Can I Bum a Smoke," "I'm Bored"* and *"Friends")*; and in lists of themes (claustrophobia, good stuff, poverty, risky behaviour and labeling) which students and I compiled from words and phrases they wrote during a brainstorming activity we called the Graffiti Wall - their interpretation of *"Life in the Sticks."* As examples of "found" text (Clifford, 1986), the journal excerpts, scripted scenes, lists of themes and photographs are left uncontextualized, to some extent left to speak for themselves. In surrealist fashion (Cifford, 1988), such fragments of text are open to multiple interpretations as they are juxtaposed with snippets of other texts. The voices of teachers and others are also heard in this fashion as I report on what was said.

The juxtaposition of forms and the polyphony of voices that emerge present various perspectives from which to view the object under investigation – me traversing the postmodern research landscape. My surrealist ethnography (Clifford, 1988) tries to evoke rather than just describe or explain. I want my layered and interweaving narratives to draw readers into the complexity of the experience in an affective and experiential way and allow them to make their own meanings.

Having said all of the above, I fear I have said far too much. The power of arts-based forms is in their evocative quality and in their openness to interpretation, allowing readers the space to encounter and respond to a work in their own way. By telling readers how to read a creative text, we are in effect limiting interpretation and undervaluing the capacity of readers to make sense of the experience for themselves. Ultimately, by over-interpreting emerging arts-based forms through academic discourse, we do a disservice to efforts to gain legitimacy for arts-based forms as scholarly works that count in their own right.

Missy

"MISSY . . . MISSSSSYYY . . . COME'ON GIRL, LET'S GO . . . COME'ON MISS." Stubborn dog. Just takes off whenever she pleases. "MISSSSSYYY!" Geez. Miss you know I haven't got all day. I'm not gonna let you off the leash again if you just take off on me like this. Wouldn't you hate that - out here in the bush and you have to stay on leash like in the city. "COME'ON MISS!" Where'd she get to? I'm sure I saw her run under the fence right here. She usually comes when I call her - well, after a while anyway. "MISSSSSYYY . . ." Okay, okay . . . I'll give her a few minutes and then I'll go in after her. I'll just sit down right here and wait . . .

Here I am at the edge of a cow pasture . . . presumably a cow pasture . . . enclosed by this poor excuse for a barbed wire fence. I haven't seen any cows yet, though there is plenty of old evidence of them – probably from last summer. The pasture is spread out in front of me. Over there a rolling hill dotted with trees. Otherwise nothing but dry, scrubby grass, flattened from the snow just melted away - blades of new green grass and clover struggling their way through. Beyond my pasture is the school compound with its fenced playing field and teacher houses. To the other side a bit of slough, mostly dry now, a few scraggly bull-rushes. Then the road. An occasional car whizzing by, gravel and dust a-flying. A few houses huddled along the lake, cold, still edged in ice. Behind me bush, bush and more bush . . .This is "the Sticks" alright.

Overhead the sky is clear blue – so close I can almost reach out and touch it – with *only a hint of wispy white. And what's that? Fish flies, clouds of them. They've been out just the past two days – a sure sign of spring. Appearing suddenly overnight in the zillions. Harmless enough – but what a nuisance. They hover around in open spaces, like this pasture, and hide in the grass so you kick them up as you're walking. I've learned to cover my face and just walk through the clouds of them as fast as I can. Just another one of those little joys of life in the sticks.*

At the Edge of the Cow Pasture

When I first arrived at my research site, almost a month ago now, it was an escape from the city, the confines of a packed schedule, buses to catch and the ringing phone - to a place of solitude, a time for gathering thoughts and finally, a chance to put my ideas into practice. I had visited the rural community before – too small to be called a town. It so happens I have a friend who grew up around here. I was guest at his cousin's wedding two years ago, at the little church just over there, and visited his family on the nearby reserve on another occasion. Now I have come to stay for one month to do a Popular Theatre project with students at the high school – research for my degree, based on my interest in better understanding the experiences of youth, particularly the experiences that may deem them "at-risk." I wondered if I was likely to find any "at-risk" youth here.

My friend dropped me off, left me here – isolated. Surrounded by unfamiliar faces, no transportation, no telephone, nowhere to go, I felt a little out of place. There is only one paved road running by on its way to an oilrig further north. The gravel side-roads are an indication of its "rural" status. Stretched out along a lake, the community is surrounded by reserve land, a few outlying homes, otherwise nothing but bush, muskeg and sloughs for hundreds of kilometers in every direction.

Day 1

The kids I have met seem really nice. They remind me of the kids I taught up in the NWT. Not as tough as the inner-city kids who seemed less trusting, less willing to give. I can't help comparing . . .

I spoke with the Vice Principal today about the students and their milieu. He feels they are fairly sheltered here from the wider world - isolated. Though the community may not be perfect at least there is a sense of community here. The kids get support from family as well as the larger community. The school is part of their extended family too.

I think it was like that for the kids I taught up north - the family and community part, though they weren't all that accepting of the school. The kids in the inner-city on the other hand survived in a harsher, less supportive environment. They were more worldly, more jaded. Many of them living on their own, working part-time, back to school after having dropped out, single moms, you name it. In comparison, the kids here seem lucky to have what they have.

[redacted]

The Community

I am staying in a trailer near the school that the administration has let me occupy. The furniture is borrowed from the drama room: a bed that is too soft, a couch that is shedding, and a television that gets only one channel. With the few house-wares and supplies I brought from the city, I have the bare essentials. None of the comforts of home.

The community has one combination hotel/restaurant/gas station/liquor/ convenience store run by the local Chinese family. There are a few other eating spots, and a Northern Store. The students are excited about the newly built A&W – junk food and job opportunities. A KFC is coming soon. It is unfortunate I do not share in their joy of junk food. The farmer's market and health food store edibles to which I have become accustomed are unavailable here. Northern Store prices are high. $3.95 for a pint of fresh strawberries for which I paid only half as much in the city. And the quality leaves much to be desired. The local eating spots, I quickly learned, do not cater to vegetarians. I tried to convince the cook at the wannabe chic café to make me some vegetarian soup. I even lent him my cookbook. Desperate times call for desperate measures!

> *My dog Missy welcomes this escape from the city. She is a big, gray and white husky with golden eyes and energy to burn. I've had her for almost five years now – ever since I liberated her, as a puppy, from a friend's brother who was not caring for her properly. I was never a dog person, until I met Missy. We spent the first years of her life in the Northwest Territories where I was teaching. In that community, even more isolated than this one, she enjoyed our daily walks through the bush, along cut-lines or snowmobile trails. She had more freedom to roam. Since we've moved to the city she's had to abide by the confines of the leash. Here in the bush, I sometimes let her off.*

Day 2

I'm working with two mixed classes, twenty-two students in total from grades 9 to 12. So far the kids seem keen. There are many who seem genuinely interested in developing their skills as performers, eager to participate in activities and make useful contributions to class.

I introduced myself and told them about our proposed research. They got a real kick out the idea of being able to code name themselves. I told them that I'd worked up north, with inner-city kids and young offenders. Someone said: **"Oh, so you wanna work with bad-assess?"** I said that wasn't the term I'd use and asked if they were bad-asses. Some said yes proudly, others said no. Maybe this is their interpretation of "at-risk." I told them I was a bit of a bad-ass myself when I was a kid. They wanted to know how bad. I said "bad enough" and just left it at that.

Mr. D., the drama teacher, has a boisterous, casual, no-nonsense style. He has developed friendly relationships with his students and a healthy drama program. Students here enjoy drama. Over the years they have taken part in collective creation projects including work on teen issues, family violence, alcoholism, and gun safety, and received grants from local organizations to make videos on AIDS and suicide prevention. They have been active in provincial drama festivals winning awards on several occasions. Prior to my arrival, a group of students participated in the regional one-act play festival, won best student director for a play about teen alcoholism, and best production for a play directed by Mr. D. At the provincial finals, they went on to win the best-actress award. The students' positive experiences with drama make my work easier.

The Bus Trip

Talking to Mr. D. about issues that might come up in our drama work, he said he tried to integrate "Native Culture" into his drama classes in his first year teaching here without much success. He abandoned the idea because the available sources of Native culture were unreliable. That was his experience. On the issue of racism, he said every time students had done something on racism in his classes in the past it was about racism by "Whites" against "Blacks" – not about racism against Natives.

Geez Missy, I really didn't want to have to go in there after you. This bush looks particularly dense and tangly. Missy where are you? "MISSSSSYYY . . . MISSSSSYYY . . . COME'ON GIRL . . . COME'ON" . . . Okay here goes . . . under the barbed wire fence . . . if I tear my sweatshirt I'll kill you . . . Just kidding. You know I wouldn't do that. What a mess! "MISSSSSYYY." How did she even get through there? "MISSSSSYYY . . . MISSY GIRL!" I wonder . . . what's with all the fallen trees . . . anyway. There are more fallen and rotting trees than standing ones . . . No, she would never have got through there, would she? Maybe around this way . . . Maybe . . . Was there a fire or something? Not recently though. The spruce trees seem to be doing okay, but everything else . . . Something in the soil? Acid rain? Geez . . . I can't get through here. "MISSSSSYYY!" Where the hell are you? Maybe I'll just wait by the fence for a while. "MISSSSSYYY . . . MISSSSSYYY . . . COME'ON GIRL . . . COME'ON MISS . . . LET'S GO GIRL!" You're pissing me off.

Spring

When I arrived here, the winter near its end, the accumulation of snow was mostly melted, the thawing earth exposed. The last brief snowfalls of the season dissolved almost as soon as they hit the ground. This followed by rain, the dark earth turned to sticky mud. When we go walking we get wet and muddy. Missy doesn't care how dirty she gets or the mud she tracks inside. I don't mind so much either, I guess. I brought all my raingear – Gortex jacket and pants, rubber boots, so it's okay. It does get difficult to walk though, with a couple pounds of mud on each foot. No matter how much you kick and scrape it won't come off. It does become a problem when I have to put on my teacher clothes and walk to school up that muddy side street. Then you can hear me complain about the mud. On the bright side, I was told, the year before it had been bone dry, the bush caught fire and the air was filled with dark, choking smoke all spring.

Can I Bum a Smoke?

Smokey is sitting alone on a bench center stage smoking a cigarette.

EnterTess.

Tess: Hey, Smokey, can I bum a smoke?

Smokey: I don't got any.

Tess: Don't lie. You always got cigarettes. Give me one.

Charlie and Dancer enter smoking and chatting. They stand off to one side.

Smokey: Anyway, I'm tired of always giving you smokes.

Tess: You're just stingy. At least give me a drag.

Smokey: Forget it. Why don't you go ask that guy over there.

Tess: No, you go.

Smokey: I'm not going. You go.

Tess: Ah, never mind.

Tess exits, frustrated . . .

Dramaturge Augusto Boal stresses the need for physical exercises to get in touch with our bodies, which are the instruments of our drama work, in order to make them more expressive.

Day 3

Many kids seem shy to use their bodies in expressive ways. Although they've had experience doing drama, their comfort levels with this kind of physical expression is tentative. I've encountered the same shyness in working with young people in other contexts - their reluctance to use their bodies in ways that are not part of their day-to-day repertoire. Too bad. I'll do as much as I can with them. The challenge is to try to get them to commit themselves physically just a little bit more. We'll continue with some of these physical exercises and see where they get us. They seem to like the ball throwing games and I like the way the games help develop communication skills and a sense of community.

Ball Games

Theme: Claustrophobia
small town mentality
two faced "so called" friends
gossip
too many rules
overprotective parents
I know what you did last summer
incest
isolation/boredom
need wheels, need money

boredom
depression
if only I was 18 years old
loneliness
life sucks and you want to die

Day 5

I attended the assembly today on the topic of violence - in response to that Taber school shooting. Everyone is a little unsettled over that. Violence was a topic of discussion in class today too - raised as a possible theme for our work. **Some saw violence as a problem that was made worse by the media, movies, videogames and the like.**

At the assembly the principal talked about the need to take care of each other - to look for the warning signs that someone might be at risk of doing something violent. And the need to put together a plan in case it ever happened here. He asked how many of the kids could get their hands on a gun and ammunition right now if they wanted to. More than three quarters of the kids put up their hands.

I was shocked and a little scared to see so many hands go up. Then I remembered that the attitude towards guns in a Native community, maybe any rural Alberta community, is different from elsewhere - here people have guns for hunting.

A Path Through the Bush

Day after day of rain and the air is filled with smells of vegetation slowly coming back to life. For the first few days Missy and I walked along the cut line behind the trailer. The ground, cleared for power lines, nothing but soggy muskeg. On either side of the clearing, *the bush was dense black spruce. Missy loved to make forays into these depths, but for me it was mostly impassable. I stuck to/in the muskeg. Soon enough we found a better place to walk - a well-worn path through the bush behind the school that takes us into a peaceful deciduous forest of trembling aspen, balsam poplars and paper birch. The forest opens into this lovely pasture. This has become our territory. We walk in every kind of weather, we venture down its many side-paths in every direction until the tall, swaying poplars give way to stunted spruce. Missy loves to run through the bush and leap over fallen branches, sniffing everywhere and chasing whatever it is she chases. She wallows in mud puddles (if I don't stop her in time) and digs for mice in the field.*

Theme: Good Stuff
freedom
big yards
volleyball
basketball
friendship
quietness
home
being at one with nature
fishing
the youth center
Merry Christmas
sex

Day 6
Today we talked about Boal's Forum Theatre, how our focus would be on learning about issues that they identified as relevant through the drama process. They would decide on the content of our work, to make it meaningful to them. The scenes we create would be "problem scenes," based on their experiences - whatever they were willing to share. Everyone would have the opportunity to be involved and contribute as much as they wanted.

The quality of their acting would not be judged, though their acting skills would help make our scenes more effective. The style would be loose and improvisational both in the creation of scenes and in performance workshops. Rather than great acting, we'd be looking for sincere responses to the situations we depict. We'd perform their scenes for each other. Members of the class would have a chance and try out different strategies looking for solutions to the problems or other ways of handling the situations - as a sort of rehearsal for future action. Hopefully, we'd have a chance to show their work to other students here and possibly at other schools to get them to respond. They were a little confused about exactly what it would entail, the form being different from what they've done before. **They thought the interactive stuff with the audience would be cool!!**

In all the Popular Theatre workshops in which I've participated or facilitated, the process has always been exhilarating and unpredictable. The content that emerged was often surprising. If you trust the process, *it's like magic because you collectively create something from nothing and the final product is greater than the sum of its parts.*

From student journals:

This type of theatre is very effective in solving problems, especially working with people who have a hard time admitting their problems and don't want to get help or are too insecure to get help.

It is neat how people can interpret things or scenes in so many different ways and take a little piece of information from the scenes or discussions to help them solve their problems.

Popular theatre is not only about helping other people through your acting but helping yourself.

Popular theatre gets people thinking and it actually makes sense if you work on it. Once we started constructing scenes, it became interesting.

I like acting, having fun, expressing myself and making people laugh – in this kind of drama I am allowed to do that.

The Mud Hole

What's that? Tap, tap. Sounds like a woodpecker. Maybe that big Pileated Woodpecker we saw by the trailer the other day. It's coming from over there. Or could it be Missy? "MISSSSSYYY." Shhh. Still tapping? Maybe Missy is trying to send me a signal. "MISSSSSSYYY." Maybe her collar is caught on a tree branch and she can't get away. Maybe she's fallen into a hole and can't get out. Or maybe she stepped into a leg-hold trap! We had a close call with a leg-hold trap up north once. I wonder if they use them here too. Oh, Missy. "MISSY?" Oh, no . . . Wait. Why would she tap to signal me? Why wouldn't she bark? Unless her snout it caught in the trap . . . Who am I kidding? It's a woodpecker. I'll go check it out anyway. I know. I'll go back into the forest

along this path parallel to this fence to that big tree and the mud hole where Missy likes to wallow. Maybe she's there. Then I'll make my way back here through the forest. The tapping sound is somewhere between there and here. I can't miss it. "MISSSSSYYY . . . MISSSSSYYY. WHERE ARE YOU GIRL?" Ahhhgg! Fish flies!

Day 8
We watched a clip from the movie "The Gods Must Be Crazy" as a critique of Western ideology (see Hoepper, 1991) - to talk about contrasting ideologies or ways of looking at the world - the modern technocratic world vs. the pre-industrial culture of the Kalahari San. The kids said they are somewhere in between the two worlds. Not entirely technocratic, but not entirely "natural" either. They are very aware of their in-betweeness, able to see the positive and negative aspects of both ways of viewing the world. They enjoy the peaceful lifestyle out here, but not the isolation. They enjoy the conveniences of the modern world, but not the demands of time, work and money that go with it. An interesting perspective. They take neither of these lifestyles entirely for granted.

> *Though I have identified an interest in working with "at-risk" youth, I struggle with the label. I've begun using the term in quotation marks because I find it so problematic based on my work with inner-city youth, young offenders and Native students. There definitely is a need here, but labeling is not the answer. Perhaps my affinity with "at-risk" youth lies in my own experience as a youth. If I were a young person today, growing up as I grew up more than twenty years ago, I wonder if I'd be "at-risk" too.*
>
> *My working-class immigrant family was fairly stable. We always had food on the table, a roof over our heads and mom at home to keep an eye on us. That was enough to get me through school. But it was tough growing up. With five kids there was never money for extras. My father was a workaholic, always struggling to make ends meet. We moved every few years. Nor were we a close family. I remember lots of fighting amongst the siblings. Never enough attention to go around.*
>
> *For whatever reason, in the process of finding myself, I turned out a rebellious teen. I had my share of risky teenage experiences. High school drama gave me the sense of belonging that I needed. Perhaps it can have a positive impact on the lives of other so-called "at-risk" youth too.*

Day 10
We had a discussion today about taken-for-granted beliefs. I played devil's advocate. The issue of male/female roles came up. Some of the boys were unwilling to give up the positions of power that as men they traditionally have in the family. **We also talked about the desire for material possessions like cars. They stressed the importance of a car to get around in a rural community. Especially for young**

people a car is also a status symbol, a symbol of freedom - **"Everyone wants a car as soon as they turn 16."** I emphasized the way beliefs change over time, how they are dependent on the perspectives of individuals and contexts.

We talked a bit about history from a European vs. a Native perspective. One student apologized for saying that the history we learn in school is from a "White" perspective. I told her there was no need to apologize. Another student responded that history is always written by the winners - hence the European perspective.

Theme: Poverty
welfare
no money, no power, no respect
can I bum a smoke? I don't got any.
mud

Day 12

We talked about the themes that emerged from our Graffiti Wall brainstorming session the other day. Under the sub-theme "poverty," one young woman asked, **"What does mud have to do with poverty?"** One of the other students answered, **"There's so much mud here because our roads aren't paved and we don't have sidewalks. Those things are paid for by taxes and our community is too poor to afford them."** I couldn't have said it better myself. There's no doubt mud is part of reality out here which everyone experiences in the most tangible of ways. We were able to make connections between the mud, poverty and the political structures that uphold it. What we didn't discuss is why the community is so poor.

Muddy Path

Mud

In the land of sticks and mud
with the melting snow
and a day
and another day of rain,
underfoot
the dirt roads become
a slick, insipid
mess
of ruts and puddles.
After another day of rain
it's tangible
all over you
soiling you
stuck to your soul
- no matter how hard you kick
it won't come off.
Insidious.
The mud
follows you home
even creeps in the front door
of the school
on gum boots
from every direction
where it insufferably
muddies the floor
and seeps into conversations
implicated
in even messier circumstances
of poverty and race
What are the geopolitics of mud?

Mr. D. has been here for ten years. He says, it was a nice quiet community, where you can go fishing and hunting, but it also has the problems of a small community. An incredible amount of gossip. Problems with drugs, alcohol and unwanted pregnancies. A real problem of teen pregnancy in the school among girls as young as twelve. Even more of a concern is the risk of AIDS from unprotected sex. AIDS is a serious problem that he hopes won't get worse. He has not yet been to an AIDS related funeral of a student, but fears it will be just a matter of time. Suicide has been a problem in the past, but more intervention workers are making a difference. He blames some of problems on the numbers of transient oil-rig workers that stay in the community in winter.

Yet, in the time he has been here, the community has grown and along with it, a sense of pride. Now there is less of a gulf between the "haves," such as teachers and nurses, and the "have nots." The community used to look gloomy. But now the run-down old houses and the car graveyards have disappeared. People are putting more money into upgrading and more effort into keeping up their gardens and yards. The social problems are being dealt with. The community is beginning to realize and face its problems.

Reclamation

One day walking
I came across an old car in the bush
the 1950's kind
with trunks
big enough to hide bodies.
It was nestled in an overgrowth
with branches
where glass used to be
tires long ago reclaimed by the earth
years' accumulation of leaves
up to its floorboards
& moss encroaching its rusted shell.

It spoke of times
when it was free
to spin its wheels,
race with the wind,
kick up dust
and gravel.

Finally, rolled here to rest
spent
when the spruce
was but a sapling.

And now
at odds and yet as one
it has achieved
a sort of stasis
with its surroundings,
as it endures
the process of reclaiming.

The Old Car

Teaching in the Northwest Territories I experienced firsthand how difficult it was for the school to meet the needs of its students. Among the ways in which we failed the students were the clashes in value orientation and preferred learning styles between their home culture and that of the school, token inclusion of Native culture in curriculum, the school's incapacity to respond to difficult social conditions. I struggled to make education meaningful for my students, but my attempts were only awkward beginnings.

According to the Vice Principal, the school opened at its current location in the early 80's. Until 1996 it housed grades 1 to 12. In 1997, with the opening of a new elementary school, it became a Jr./Sr. High with grades 7 to 12. Next year it will add a grade 6 class to accommodate the overflow the local elementary school is experiencing. At this time, it is one of three schools in the area, along with the band school on the reserve serving grades 1 to 9, and the public elementary school for grades 1 to 6.

The student population is 343, with 90% of Aboriginal descent. Out of 24 full-time staff members 2 are Aboriginal. The school receives its funding provincially and is under the supervision of a local school division.

The Senior High School offers academic and general programs as well as an Integrated Occupational Program (IOP). Along with the regular Jr. High program, the school offers remedial, transitional and core (for those headed to IOP) programs. Other special programs include a lunch program available to all students, with those in Career and Technology Studies working in the kitchen to help run a successful catering business. The school boasts successful outdoor education and arts programs. There is a social services worker in residence. An Aboriginal language course is offered in grade 7. They are currently developing an Aboriginal cultural program as a grade 8-9 option, which they would also like to be able to offer at the high school level.

The student population includes several students from a nearby youth detention camp, who are accommodated through cooperation between the band and the provincial justice system. According to the Vice Principal, there is a high level of participation between the community and the school.

The School

Okay, here I am. Boy this is a gorgeous spruce tree - a big one . . . Never mind about the tree, you've got to find that dog. "MISSSSSYYY. MISSSSSYYY" I wonder if she could have gone down that way? I wonder if there are bears around here . . . It looks like bear country . . . Just stick to the plan. Check out the bush between here and the spot by the fence. Maybe I can find a way through that tangle of fallen trees from this direction. Maybe I can even catch a glimpse of that woodpecker. Shhh . . . the woodpecker? Nope, I can't hear anything from here. Anyway, this looks manageable . . . "MISSSSSYYY. MISSY GIRL WHERE ARE YOU? MISSSSSYYY" It's actually quite lovely in here - lots of big trees. White spruce? Haven't seen many this big. Ouch . . . that branch had thorns . . . wild rose . . . got me right in the face too. Shhh there's the sound again. . . it's off to the right . . . the woodpecker. I should . . . no, I better just get back to the spot. That's right. What am I thinking? What if Missy got back there and I'm not there for her. Oh no. "MISSSSSYYY. MISSSSSYYY. HERE I AM. HERE I AM GIRL. I'M COMING . . . "

Theme - Risky Behaviour

thugs
drugs
fighting
little alcoholic grade 7's
cops suck

unprotected sex
party from dusk to dawn
bush parties
one night stands
violence
suck it bitch
where's my joint
Fah-Q

Life in the Sticks

Day 15
The kids say that boredom is a factor leading to a lot of the other issues they mentioned: alcohol & drugs, abuse, domestic violence, teen pregnancy, STDs & AIDS, youth violence, suicide, depression, boredom, unemployment, criminal activity. The boredom they figure is mostly due to the fact that they live in such a small, rural community. Their issues determined by where they live. That's where the idea of "Life in the Sticks" came from.

This was some of the discussion around the room today: "**Boredom leads to drugs, sex, criminal activity . . . But this kind of behaviour is not unique to a small town mentality. Kids in the city get bored too, don't they? And they get into trouble . . . It's about money. Whether you've got it or not. Ya but, in the city you can spend 40 bucks on entertainment and still be looking for things to do. 40 bucks would go a lot further out here. But even the city kids who go to hockey lessons and swimming lessons . . . even they aren't satisfied. They're still looking for excitement . . . Aren't they? That's why there's all the crime and drugs in the city.**"

They're starting to question their taken-for-granted beliefs about "Life in the Sticks." If it's not small town, lack of money or lack of things to do, then what is it? These are the hard questions that we need to explore through our drama work.

I'm Bored

Jezebel is lying on the floor, doing nothing. She is bored. There is a knock at the door. Jezebel ignores it. Jay and Sophia, two of her friends, enter wearing winter coats, hats and gloves.

Jay: Hey Jez, what'cha doing?

Jezebel: Nothing. I am so bored, you guys.

Sophia: Well get up. Let's do something.

Jezebel: There's nothing to do.

Jay: Let's find something to do.

Jezebel: Like what?

Jay: Let's go for a walk.

Jezebel & Sophia: *(together)* Too cold.

Jay: Well what about . . .

Jezebel: I told you, there's nothing to do.

Jay: Whatever. Let's go Sophia . . .

Some students like drama because they think it is fun. They participate in activities for the chance to goof around and make their friends laugh. They are more interested in the social aspects of drama than the work itself. They do not take it seriously. No one ever thinks of bringing paper and pen to drama class. Others come to class because they have to. They are here in body, but their spirits are elsewhere. They seem reluctant to join in, either because they are too shy, self-conscious, or because they have something else on their minds. Some of the grade twelve students are under quite a bit of pressure in their academic courses and occasionally do their other homework in drama class. There are a few students who I have only ever seen two or three times. I wonder if they hope to pass drama or what compels them to show up at all.

Day 18
For a teacher, I'm sure not very good at exerting control. Maybe I'm too permissive. I did ask a couple of times if they would please listen to each other and put away the distractions. I have issues with teacher power. Sure I want them to want to listen to me, but I don't want them to have to. Why should they? I should try to earn their respect and capture their attention by what I have to offer - something that is worth their while. That's my challenge as a teacher.

Walking Missy

Today, out walking, I suddenly realized that my walks with Missy out here in the bush reflect the kind of day we've had in the classroom. Yesterday after a tough day the walk was hurried and intense - I was focused inward, hands in my pockets, deep in thought, wondering and worrying. Trying to work things out, make things right – at least in my head. Today's walk was leisurely. My step was light and I caught myself singing a little tune as I walked along. I enjoyed the sunshine and the smell of the forest. Our walks have become a kind of metaphor for my research process. They reflect my journey through our classroom work, mark the passing of time and the progress that we make - the good days, the bad days, the exploration, the discovery, the distractions and the obstacles - the adventure . . .

Lessons I learned about teaching
from my dog
Missy:
a husky,
a breed
known for their
independence
and strong will
not unlike teenagers.

Walking her in the city,
on leash,
I've learned that
relationships are about
power
negotiation
give and take.

A notorious puller
she insists on
always
being ahead.
A vigorous lesson.

I've learned to
lead from behind.

People always ask me
"Who's walking who?

I tell them:
Everyone asks me that!
And laughs.

But it's not about
Ego
"Who's walking who?"
It's about walking together.

Leading from behind,
I learned the subtle arts of
tugging
and nudging

and pointing
in the right direction.

I've learned to respect her need
to stop
to sniff
to eat grass
to mark her territory
to run and chase things.

And sometimes
I've learned I can even
turn her pulling,
to positive ends
like getting to the top of a hill.

Yet, there's only so much
resistance
a person can take.

Sometimes I am overprotective,
afraid to let her off leash.
There are perils
in the bush:
like Porcupines & Coyote!!!.

And rules!
To leash or not to leash . . .

Yet, there's such a thing as being
too protective.
And sometimes,
I've learned
you just
have to
break
the rules.
Sometimes
I let her
run
loose.

Then she's free to explore
on her own terms . . .

My back sure feels better.

I've learned
what a relief it is
to give up control.
She sets the pace
and I try   to keep up,
stay close.

Better for both of us.

Sure we run into obstacles,
now and then,
unsympathetic dogs
and their owners,
but we deal with it.

I've learned
to appreciate
all the little
signals
& responses
that make a difference:
eye contact,
a nod,
encouraging words,
rituals.

We both know
the value of
a treat!

I've learned not
to underestimate her.

She knows what I expect.

She understands
negotiation.

When I trust her,
more often than not,
she lives up to my expectations.

On those other occasions,
it's about a need to rebel.
And that's okay too.

She knows when
she can get away with it.
When she runs off into the bush
and I lose her
(temporarily)
and get all in a panic,
she almost always turns up
a little later
up ahead on the path.

This is another
of her lessons.
She's teaching me
To trust that
She knows the way

Oh, geez *!!%#*&! . . . . .#$!!&%* I hate barbed wire fences. "MISSSSSYYY. YOU DAMN DOG. WHERE ARE YOU? MISSSSSYYY." Still no sign of her. What if she was here while I was traipsing through the bush? What if I missed her? What if she's on her way home right now? Do you think she'd be able to find her way home from here? Yes. No. I don't know. She wouldn't go home by herself. Would she? She would have heard me calling. "MISSSSSYYY." She would have heard me and come to me in the bush. Oh! Let me just run to the top of the hill and have a look around. I can still keep an eye on this spot from there. Damn fish flies. "MISSSSSYYY. HERE GIRL. COME'ON MISS. WHERE ARE YOU?"

I guess our work has had some success, but there have been so many obstacles and frustrations along the way. Attendance has been an ongoing problem for which I was somewhat prepared. I chose an improvisational form of drama because it allows actors to come and go. One student plays a character one day and another takes her/his place the next. This requires some re-explaining and re-working of scenes, but does bring some fresh insight. There has also been much late coming, which is annoying, but tolerable. In my previous work with youth, I have developed patience as a survival tactic.

A lack of commitment on the part of some students is our greatest obstacle. Some students are only interested in having a laugh. They bore easily and complain that the scenes are not funny enough – as if being funny was all it was about. They also have little patience for the rehearsal process, which involves repetition and are reluctant to do any reflection.

Theme: Labeling
rez boys
wanna be sisters
freaks
rude people
dikes & fags
wannabees
two faced bitches
burnout
losers
sluts
fur traders
gross kissers
scammers

THIS SUCKS!!
Two Faced
So Called
FRIENDS
SUCKS
TO BE
YOU

The Graffiti Wall

From student journals:

I'm learning how students in my class work together. The games we play are very good in teaching us how to work together, but they would be more effective if we would practice them for a longer period of time.

I don't like the popular theatre . . . I think it could be funnier.

The game I enjoyed the most was the one where we threw the ball to the person behind us. This game involved teamwork and cooperation, much of what our class lacked.

This is boring. I have a few ideas but I can't get them across because the teacher doesn't listen to me.

This stuff is different because some people don't like or even know what we were doing. It would be better if some poor sports were putting in more effort.

You will always run into people with negative attitudes who are unwilling to cooperate. I don't know the best solution, but these people will eventually be dealt with in some way.

Day 20

We've been working through this process of telling stories and creating scenes. The stories students have shared have been about breaking school rules and getting suspended, borrowing the parents' car without permission, alcohol abuse by minors, tobacco addiction, smoking marijuana, peer pressure, name-calling, gossip, fights and betrayal among friends, dysfunctional relationships, drunken house parties, sexual promiscuity, run-ins with the police . . . Like all teenagers, these students have their rebellious streaks. Their stories were all too familiar. Stories I've heard elsewhere. Not too different from when I was a teenager.

> *On my way to school on Friday evening to help supervise the dance, I found a backpack hidden under a bush along the fence. Inside was a six-pack of alcoholic coolers. I didn't know what to do. On the one hand I was there to help supervise so had to turn in the backpack, didn't I? I couldn't let them be drinking at the dance, could I? On the other hand this is just like something I might have done in high school. I could understand the impulse to want to drink at the school dance. Just a bit of harmless fun, wasn't it? Did I have to turn it in? We'd just been exploring an incident in class that happened the previous year. Some kids were caught drinking on a school bus trip – one got expelled. The kids said it was because someone had "ratted" and they hated "rats."*
>
> *I ended up getting the V.P. and showing him to the backpack. I did it not because I had to, but because I was concerned for the students. At least that's what I told myself. I didn't want anyone getting in trouble, or the drinking leading to something worse. I remembered only too well the dangers of drinking at the school dance.*

Day 22

I did an interview with a few kids who agreed to meet with me during their spare last period. I think they liked the idea of being tape-recorded.

We talked about what they thought the scenes we'd created were all about. I asked if they still thought the rural setting led to boredom, which resulted in that kind of behaviour. They acknowledged that they were making the risky choices. A significant step I think. I asked what they thought of the label "at-risk." They denied being "at-risk." They claimed their risky behaviour was not a problem but about choice and habit.

> *I wanted our work to be empowering for the students, but it's not that simple, is it? Empowerment or conscientization are individual, contextual – not measurable. Personal growth and social change are gradual processes. Values and beliefs are not currency to be exchanged.*

> *Knowledge doesn't necessarily lead to action. Like power, empowerment is always shifting. There are no easy solutions to the problems faced by these kids. It's about more than making good choices and taking responsibility. These problems are beyond them and beyond my attempts at empowerment through drama.*

Missy is nowhere to be seen. Where the heck could she have got to? Sure she takes off once in a while, but never for this long. It's got to be what . . . forty minutes by now. Geez Miss. You think I've got nothing better to do than hang around waiting for you. "MISSSSSYYY . . . MISSSSSYYY . . ." Oh Missy, where are you? Okay . . . what do I do now? I better just sit here for a while. She'll show up, right? What if something's happened to her? Maybe she chased a dog or some wild animal . . . a rabbit or a porcupine - you know what happened the last time she chased a porcupine - or a coyote or a bear. Oh my! Who knows where she could be. Maybe she's at someone's house right now - one of those houses down along the road. Oh no, what if she's run out onto the road . . . Missy. Where are you? Where are you my baby girl? What will I do if something's happened to her? . . . and the day before I go home too. Maybe I should have kept her on the leash. You know how impulsive she is.

Day 24
Our form of drama is maybe a little looser than what students are used to. They have a bit of performance anxiety. At the beginning they kept asking me what the play was going to be about - not used to the idea of allowing the content to emerge. Even after we had developed a number of scenes and worked with them, they were still not sure what we were going to show an audience.

> *On our way out walking one evening we stopped at the baseball diamond to watch part of the game. Members of the community including parents, staff at the school and students got together to play. Looked like they were having great fun. I had to stop Missy from wanting to chase the ball every time it came near the fence. She goes nutty over balls. She got lots of attention as usual – everyone wanting to pet her. Then on our way home after our walk, she was off leash. Already getting dark, she must've got into something dead behind the school there because boy did she stink. It was so bad I had to give her a complete scrub down in the middle of the night. Giving Missy a bath is no easy task at the best of times.*

Day 26
We did our show today for the school. Mr. D. pulled in five other classes during the last hour of the day. The room was packed. Our kids did a great job with their scenes. They played up a lot of stuff for laughs and improvised some new stuff. It went over well. The audience was attentive. They responded to the experiences they were seeing on stage. The times I asked if anything like that had ever happened to them, I got the reply, **"Exactly like that!"** They were shy to participate though. At first I could barely get a yes or no out of them. When asked to

elaborate they would hide their faces. But they warmed up as we got going. We got suggestions and even got a few up on stage to try their ideas.

Tangled Bush

Okay, this is it. I've got to go in there and find her . . . I've got to . . . I've just got to fight . . . my way through . . . this tangle . . . of brush. Okay . . . I can do this . . . it's just a matter of . . . there . . . that's better. Okay, that's better . . . now which way . . . it looks a bit clearer over there . . . Now I'm back into this spruce forest. If you can call it a forest. Whoa . . . it's like another planet in here . . . muskeg . . . if it was really wet I'd never get through here . . . I've just got to find places to step on the hummocks of dried up sphagnum moss . . . and so dense . . . What is this whitish dusty stuff everywhere . . . probably from the dried up tree hair lichen . . . kinda spooky. If Missy is in here she'd never hear me calling. Sound isn't carrying at all. I wonder how far this stuff goes on . . . over there . . . there seems to be a break in the trees over there . . . hmmm, a growth of new aspen . . . there's no way I'm getting through that without a machete . . . "MISSSSSYYY. MISSSSSYYY. COME HERE GIRL. COME'ON MISS." I wonder if she's out there somewhere. Wait . . . are those dogs barking in the distance? There must be a house over there. I bet she's over there somewhere. It'd be just like her to go chasing other dogs. I'll have to make my way back out and then circle around by the road . . .

Day 27
Classes were cancelled today due to a track and field meet. Oh well. One of the common sorts of interruptions in the day-to-day life of any school. I helped out with timing the track events. It was fun. Great to see the kids in a different context.
Our planned visit to the back lakes has fallen through. We'd hoped to take a couple of days and bus out to some of the more remote schools the in district. These would have been perfect audiences for our work. Mr. D. made some phone calls but the timing was all wrong. He's going to give the drama teacher at a school in a nearby town a call.

Two more days to wrap up and then my time here is over. It is amazing how quickly the month has gone. I am looking forward to going home. Not that it has not been enlightening, but I have had enough of the meager lifestyle. Not that I live in decadence in the city either, but at least it is home. This environment is more harsh - it takes more effort just to survive. At least that is how it has been for me. Curious the things from home that I miss. I am looking forward to my own shower. Here the trickle of water is cold before I am even finished washing my hair. I miss my cupboard full of dishes. A cupboard full of dishes can be so comforting. I want to cook myself a real meal, go shopping at the farmer's market on Saturday and sleep in my own bed . . . But enough of dreaming of home.

We have arranged a school visit for tomorrow to a neighbouring town. A two-and-a-half hour bus ride each way. It will be interesting to see how the students respond to performing in front of a group of their peers from another school. It will be interesting to see how the drama students from the other school respond to our scenes.

On the Bus

Friends

Shadzz is at the wheel of his pick-up truck. He has stopped at the lounge to pick up his girlfriend Elizabeth (sitting in the middle) and her friend Horse (at the window), who is in town visiting.

Horse: (*to Elizabeth*) So, we're on for tonight?

Elizabeth: (*quietly to Horse*) Well, ya . . . um just wait . . .

Shadzz: What's up Elizabeth. What movies did you get?

Elizabeth: I didn't get any . . . I want to go partying tonight with Horse.

Shadzz: What?

Horse: She wants to go partying.

Shadzz: Was I talking to you? (*to Elizabeth*) I thought we were gonna watch movies tonight?

Horse starts to light a cigarette.

Shadzz: (*to Horse*) No smoking in my truck.

Horse: What is your problem? (*He rolls down the window and throws the cigarette out.*) . . .

From student journals:

The school was filled with skaters – I've never seen that many white teenagers in one school – I'm not racist. It was just weird.

Going to another high school and performing in front of other drama students was a learning experience for me, even though I had to fight off the girls!

It was interesting to act with another class from somewhere else although I was shy of getting up and acting in front of them.

Many people were uneasy about presenting the topics . . . many giggles came from our class.

It didn't seem like we had much to show since all we did was play games - it turned out better than I thought it would.

I did not think that the audience would have so many views about the plays we did this afternoon.

The comments and suggestions from the audience were overwhelming and they weren't afraid to act out their suggestions.

I learned things like not only to take one view of issues like drugs, sex, alcohol and everything else that could affect you and your family and peers.

Day 29

What a day! We left about 10:00 this morning and got back at 4:30. We were an hour late taking off, met with lots of construction on the road, but made it to our school visit. We had about 50 minutes to perform and the show went great. Our kids were a bit nervous at first - being on someone else's turf - but did a great job. I'm glad our students had this chance to perform for a really engaged and active audience. We got some great discussion going.

They especially had fun with the "Friends" scene. Excellent interventions from the "spect-actors." Our kids couldn't resist jumping in too.

When I introduced the idea of "Life in the Sticks," the kids from there, which is an actual town, not like our little rural community, said: "**We live 'in the sticks' too.**" It's all relative, I guess. At the end of our performance they said the issues we presented were familiar ones for youth in their town too. That was good for our kids to hear.

On the way home we blew a tire. It scared the crap out of me because it sounded like a gunshot. The kids thought that was pretty funny.

> *I'm going to miss the sticks. Especially our long walks in the bush – the freedom to roam, the fresh air. I'll even miss the swarms of buzzing fish flies. Well, maybe not the fish flies.*
>
> *When I first arrived there were just tiny buds on the branches. Now the leaves are out - a whole inch long and the tops of the trees are all green. It's lovely in the woods and here in the pasture. Missy will miss it too. She's gone crazy with all the freedom. Walking in the ravine in the city just won't cut it after this. When I get home I'll have to get busy writing. My body so resists sitting still in front of my computer hour after hour. Speaking of sitting still . . . It's time to get up and find my dog.*

Day 30

Just a handful of kids to say goodbye to today. The community was having a clean up day with which the school was also involved. I think that's why most of the students stayed away. Oh well - that's the way it goes.

Geez, where the heck am I. I hope I'm going the right way . . . I never get lost . . . I think I'm . . . Okay . . . Ya, here I am. Back at the spot . . . well, almost back at the spot . . . close enough. Now if I go down towards the road I can probably cut through the bush down there where it narrows. There's gotta be a house . . . What? "MISSY? MISSY! THERE YOU ARE. COME HERE YOU BAD GIRL. WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?" Am I glad to see you, you little bitch. Look at her looking all sheepish - ears back. "WHERE DID YOU COME FROM? AND ALL WET TOO?" I wonder how long she's been behind me. She must have heard me calling, out by those young aspens and followed me back. "BOY AM I GLAD TO SEE YOU. I WAS SO WORRIED MISS. YA, I WAS SO WORRIED ABOUT YOU. WHERE DID YOU GO, HEY? WHERE DID YOU GO, YOU BAD GIRL? COME'ON MISS. COME'ON GIRL, LET'S GO HOME." And about time too.

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Part II – Research Methodology

. . . Paper 1 was a playful journey through my experience of doing research in a rural Alberta community, experimenting with an alternative way of representing that experience.

The next paper is my response to the qualitative research community, for whom questions of methodology are central. Qualitative inquiry involving humans searches for appropriate methods to answer the kinds of questions it raises and is careful to maintain an ethical stance. Paper 2, Exploring Risky Youth Experiences: Popular Theatre as a Participatory, Performative Research Method, is based on my interest in sharing with a qualitative research community the methodology that I employed in my study. In particular, I present Popular Theatre as a research method that allows the researcher, a community of research participants, and the research topic to converse in exciting, alternative ways . . .

Paper 2: Exploring Risky Youth Experiences: Popular Theatre as a Participatory, Performative Research Method

Introduction

For my doctoral research, I wanted to better understand the experiences of youth from their perspectives, particularly the kinds of experiences that might deem them "at-risk." To this end, I engaged a group of drama students in a rural Alberta community, of majority Aboriginal population[1], in exploring their issues through a Popular Theatre process. My study explored the potential of Popular Theatre as a pedagogical tool and a research methodology, as the drama students and I enacted it. As this paper illustrates, seeing Popular Theatre as a research method draws on traditions in both participatory (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Kidd & Byram, 1978; McTaggart, R., 1997; Park, P. et al., 1993) and arts-based/performed ethnographic approaches (Conquergood, 1998; Fabian, 1990; Turner & Turner, 1982) as an effective means of collectively drawing out and examining participants' experiences towards producing new understandings. Popular Theatre, as a qualitative research method that is both participatory and performative, presents alternative methodological approaches to engaging participants in doing research.

This paper focuses on Popular Theatre as a research method. Following the Popular Theatre phase of my research process, I wrote a series of scripted descriptions depicting significant moments during the participatory work with students, an example of which I have included. I drew on these scripts to engage in a further reflective, interpretive process to help me make sense of what the work with students revealed, including discourse analysis, narrative inquiry and autoethnography.

What is Popular Theatre?

The term Popular Theatre was used by Canadian Ross Kidd (among others) in the 1970s to talk about the form of development work he was doing in Botswana and Zimbabwe at the time (Kidd, 1984b; 1983). Popular Theatre[2] is "a process of theatre which deeply involves specific communities in identifying issues of concern, analyzing current conditions and causes of a situation, identifying points of change, and analyzing how change could happen and/or contributing to the actions implied" (Prentki & Selman, 2000, p. 8). Better defined by its intentions of personal and social transformation, than by the various forms it may take (Boal, 1979/1974; Cohen-Cruz, & Schutzman, 1994; Kidd, 1984a; Prentki & Selman, 2000; Rohd, 1998), Popular Theatre draws on participants' experiences to collectively create theatre and engage in discussion of issues through theatrical means.

The work of Bertolt Brecht (Brecht, 1964/57; Esslin, 1984) in Germany in the 1930s, was a theatrical form that influenced the development of Western Popular Theatre in the way it reclaimed theatre for political and community purposes. Brecht felt that realism in the theatre encouraged passivity amongst bourgeois audiences, suppressing the inclination to be active participants in the theatre as in life. Brecht looked for ways to break the theatrical "fourth wall," in order to raise awareness amongst his audiences. His Epic Theatre used techniques of "alienation" within the dramatic action including episodic scenes interrupted by narration, songs, parables, the projection of texts and images, to break the illusion of the performance, to make audiences active interpreters of the multilayered text rather than playing on their emotions by drawing them into the narrative. For Brecht, Epic Theatre "appeals less to the feelings than to the spectator's reason. Instead of sharing the experience the spectator must come to grips with things" (p. 23). Brecht intended that the Epic Theatre experience awaken a critical consciousness in the spectator.

In the 1960s and 70s Popular Theatre grew out of or alongside the popular education movement, Brazilian Paulo Freire (1970, 1973) being one of popular education's best known proponents. Freire developed his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in a time of extreme political repression in Brazil. His liberatory, literacy education involved not only reading the *word*, but also reading the *world* through the development of critical consciousness or conscientization. A critical consciousness allowed people to question the nature of their historical and social situation—to *read* their world—with the goal of acting as subjects in the creation of a democratic society. Like Brecht, Freire wanted human beings to take an active role in their lives. His popular education methods countered the dominant system of education which he described as a "banking model" where students were passive recipients of the teacher's knowledge; a system inherently oppressive and dehumanizing.

Popular education programs with similar goals developed around the same time, and still continue, particularly in adult education and community development projects around the world[3]. Popular education is aimed at empowering traditionally excluded, marginalized or subordinated sectors of society. With its political intentions of collective social change towards a more equitable and democratic society through raised awareness and collaborative action, its practices explore the learners' lived experiences in both their humanizing and oppressive dimensions. It draws upon and validates learners' knowledge in the production of new knowledge. Through critical dialogue, reflection and problem posing learners discuss the possibilities of transforming the oppressive elements of their experience culminating in collective social action. This involves a dynamic of reflection and action or "praxis" (Freire, 1973), a concept central to participatory processes.

Inspired by Brecht's theatrical techniques and countryman Freire's popular education approach, Augusto Boal, in the 1960s, developed a specific set of theatrical techniques he called the *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979/1974). Like Brecht, his theatre challenged traditional theatrical conventions. For Boal, the commercial or professional theatre was an instrument of the ruling class, creating divisions in society by separating the actor from the spectator. In traditional theatre, the spectator is invited to identify and empathize with the characters in the drama, and the play provides, at its end, an Aristotelian sense of catharsis, leaving the spectator with a feeling of resolution, a fundamentally passive exercise. To create active audiences Boal's theatre not only breaks the "fourth wall" but also the division between actor and audience by transforming the spectator into a "spect-actor" by taking on the role of the protagonist. His techniques of Image Theatre, Simultaneous Dramaturgy and Forum Theatre give the audience a part in the dramatic action, by discussing plans for change, directing the dramatic action and/or trying out different solutions through drama. For Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* was a weapon for oppressed people to use towards changing their social reality, theatre for the people, by the people, "a rehearsal of revolution" (p. 155).

Following his arrest, torture and exile from Brazil for his political involvements, Boal exiled to Europe where he continued his work. To meet the needs of his European participants, who felt more anxious and alienated than oppressed, his *Rainbow of Desire* (1995) took a more therapeutic or psychodramatic approach based on his belief that "to revolutionize society requires both an analytical overview of social history and a personal, practical investigation of one's own behavioural psychology" (Cohen-Cruz & Schutzman, 1994, p. 145). Upon his return to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and election to parliament in 1993, Boal developed techniques of *Legislative Theatre* (1999) to consult the public on government issues through theatre. Versions of Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*[4] and other Popular Theatre forms are practiced worldwide within communities concerned with enacting social justice.

Popular Theatre as Participatory Research

In the 1970s, also in association with the popular education movement, participatory research developed around the world as a research method[5] (see Fals-Borda, 1979, 1982; Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Freire, 1988; Gaventa, 1988; McTaggart, 1997; Park, et al., 1993; Hall, 1979, 1981; Hurst, 1995).

Viewed as a means of creating knowledge as well as a tool for education, the development of consciousness and mobilization for action, participatory research involves a process of "transformative praxis" (Fals-Borda, 1991). As research "for," "with" and "by" the people rather than "on" the people, it seeks to break down the distinction between researchers and researched – the subject/object relationship of traditional research, instead creating a subject/subject relationship. Ideally, participants are involved in the research process from beginning to end, in the creation, interpretation and dissemination of knowledge. Participatory research stresses the inherent capacity for participants to create their own knowledge based on their experiences. In the process, "popular knowledge" is generated by the group, taken in, analyzed and reaffirmed or criticized, making it possible to flesh out a problem and understand it in context.

Striving to end the monopoly of the written word, participatory research has traditionally incorporated alternative methods including photography, radio, poetry, music, myths, drawing, sculpture, puppets and popular theatre, as meeting spaces for cultural exchange (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Park et al., 1993). Drawing on an affective logic involving sentiment and emotions rather than purely scientific logic, the group process ceases to convey isolated opinions as in surveys or interviews – becoming instead a springboard for collective reasoning. The knowledge produced is socially heard, legitimized and added to the people's collective knowledge, empowering them to solve their own problems (Fals-Borda, 1991). For Salzar (1991) participatory research is more than just a research method; it is "an egalitarian philosophy of life designed to break unjust or exploitative power relations and to achieve a more satisfactory kind of society" (p. 62).

Popular Theatre, as a method of participatory research (Coutier, 1997; Kidd, R. & Byram, 1978; Kraai, MacKenzie & Youngman, 1979; McTaggart, 1997; Park, 1993), involves shared ownership of the research process, community-based analysis of issues, with an orientation towards community action.

Popular Theatre as Performative Research

Popular Theatre, theorized as a research method builds on existing qualitative methods, such as Clandinin & Connelley's (1994, 2000) narrative inquiry, and alternative or arts-based ways of knowing and representing research (Diamond & Mullen, 1999; Eisner, 1997; Finley, 2003; Norris, 1997). A post-modern attitude towards "truth" and the production of knowledge has legitimized an abundance of alternative approaches to doing research and new forms of representing research in the social sciences[6]. Amongst these, arts-based researchers have written performative texts, performed their research (Adu-Poku et al., 2001; Donmoyer & Yennie-Donmoyer, 1995; Jackson, 1998; Mienczakowski, 1995; Saldaña, 1999, 2003; Saldaña & Wolcott, 2001 to mention a few), and used performance to gather participant responses and interpret them (Conrad, 2002; Norris, 2000). Denzin (1997a) calls ethnodrama "the single most powerful way for ethnography to recover yet interrogate the meanings of lived experience" (p. 94).

Performance ethnography, as a performative approach to research has traditions in the fields of anthropology (Fabian, 1990; Turner, 1982, 1986; Turner & Turner, 1982) and communication/performance studies (Conquergood, 1985, 1992, 1998; Dailey, 1998), where performance is regarded as a legitimate/ethical way of representing ethnographic understanding. In their research, performance ethnographers find or create opportunities to observe and/or participate in performances. They also perform their cultural understandings to others. This is similar to what students and I did in *"Life in the Sticks."*

In performance ethnography, performance spills from the stage into "real" life. As instances of performance that provide cultural understandings, performance ethnographers inquire into cultural events such as public gatherings, ritual occasions, games/sporting events as well as theatrical events such as storytelling and dance. They also investigate social dramas or dramatic moments in everyday life such as moments of conflict. They inquire into everyday interactions including culturally conditioned behviour, the performance of social roles – gender, race, status, age, and communicative/speech acts that are performative (Austin, 1975; Butler, 1997).

Recently, the notion of performance (or performativity) has been embraced by qualitiative social researchers as a form of critical pedagogy (Denzin, 2003), in doing arts-based inquiry (Finley, 2003), in the writing of performative texts (Denzin, 1997b; Mullen, 2003), and in critical arts education (Garoian, 1999). For Denzin (2003), performance ethnography as praxis is "a way of acting on the world in order to change it" (p. 228). Finley asserts that performance creates an open, dialogic space for inquiry and expression through "an imaginative interpretation of events and the contexts of their occurrences" (2003, p. 287). Performance as a passionate, visceral and kinetic activity creates opportunities for communion among participants, researchers and research audiences (Denzin, 2003; Finley, 2003). Performance opens a liminal pedagogical space that allows for a reflexive learning process that "recognize[s] the cultural experiences, memories, and perspectives – participants' multiple voices – as viable content . . . encourages participant discussions of complex and contradictory issues" (Garoian, 1999, p. 67) and includes the involvement of the observer.

In performance ethnography, participants' performances both staged and in real life, provide insight into their lived experiences and their cultural world. Moreover, as anthropologist Fabian (1990) claims, some types of cultural knowledge cannot simply be called up and expressed in discursive statements by informants, but can be represented "only through action, enactment, or performance" (p. 6). He claims that knowledge about culture or social life is performative rather than informative. In this way, Fabian pushes insight about performance "toward its methodological imperative: performance as a method, as well as a subject of ethnographic research" (p. 86). In a performative epistemology, performance is an embodied, empathic way knowing and "deeply sensing the other" (Conquergood, 1985, pg. 3).

Popular Theatre makes use of a participatory form of critical performance ethnography (Fabian, 1990), deliberately creating opportunities for exploration through performance or "acting out." What better way to study lived experience than by re-enacting it. A Popular Theatre process, which may include drama activities such as image work, improvisation, role-play and collective creation, engages participants in generating, interpreting and re-presenting their ideas. By taking on a role, the "player" exists simultaneously in two worlds: as a character in the experience of the "as if" world and as an actor evaluating the situation from the outside, within the real world. The player is both involved and detached in both realities, alternating from one to the other, observing the self in action, comparing the two worlds to arrive at some understanding or meaning (Courtney, 1988).

Schechner (1985) claims that performance is a paradigm of liminality. Fundamental to all performance is the characteristic of "restored behaviour" or "twice-behaved behaviour" which is "symbolic and reflexive: not empty but loaded behaviour multivocally broadcasting significance . . . [in which] the self can act in/as another" (p. 52). This allows an individual to become someone other than themselves. The play frame opens a liminal space where the "not me" encounters the "not not me" (Schechner, 1985 p. 123). As such, it offers an alternative performative way of knowing - a unique and powerful way of accessing knowledge, drawing out responses that are spontaneous, intuitive, tacit, experiential, embodied and affective, rather than simply cognitive (Courtney, 1988). In Popular Theatre, through "acting out" participants are involved in a process that is critical and analytic, a mimetic[7] process that has transformative potential (Taussig, 1993).

"Life in the Sticks:" A Popular Theatre Project

A study involving Popular Theatre with a group of youth began from my interest in better understanding the experiences of youth that might deem them "at-risk." Based in my prior experience working with so called "at-risk" youth, I wanted to find ways to better meet their needs. Popular Theatre was a way for the students and I to collectively examine their experiences, for the purposes of raising their awareness (and that of the audiences to which they performed), helping them look for solutions/responses to issues they identify, and to give me insight into their experiences that might deem them "at-risk," from their perspective.

In the month I spent working with the students, I engaged them in a Popular Theatre process that drew on their experiences to examine issues they identified as relevant to their lives. The process began with a series of games and activities for group building, trust building and skill development, moved on to the exploration of themes through brainstorming, image work and discussion, then into devising, storytelling of relevant incidents from their lives and the collective creation of scenes based on these stories. As we created the scenes, we animated them to explore the issues raised, using techniques adapted from Boal's (1992) *Theatre of the Oppressed*, including Forum Theatre.

Our theme *"Life in the Sticks,"* emerged from the drama activities and discussion. Students felt that the issues they faced, including substance abuse, risky sex, interpersonal conflict were determined by their rural environment. As one student put it, "It's because we've got nothing better to do. Kids get into all kinds of trouble because they are bored." Students brainstormed words and phrases in a Graffiti Wall activity and sculpted images of *"Life in the Sticks."* The process of devising and animating scenes allowed an in-depth, embodied discussion of students' perspectives regarding issues that affected their lives. The scenes we created, loosely based on their stories and/or issues that arose during our exploration were about boredom, rule breaking at school and the consequences, alcohol and tobacco use, addiction, risky sex, gossip, gender relations, and conflict among friends. The drama raised questions inciting students to examine the issues and their beliefs and re-evaluate aspects of their lived experiences.

Towards the end of the process, I conducted an informal interview with a small group of students who volunteered to participate. I asked them what they thought the scenes we created were all about. Did they believe that the behaviour depicted was determined by their rural environment? Ultimately, the students denied being victims of their environment; they rejected the notion "at-risk," claiming instead that their risky behaviour was a matter of personal choice and habit. As one student said, "You drink just because you want to and do anything else because you want to." The notion of personal choice gave them back a sense of agency in and responsibility for their own behaviour. This attitude had the potential to be empowering, perhaps as one step towards solving their problems. Our work left me wondering, however, what motivated their risky choices.

The community action in which our Popular Theatre project culminated were two performance/workshops of our scenes, one for students at their school and another at a school in a neighbouring town. We used a Forum Theatre model (Boal, 1995) to engage audiences in further discussion of issues, searching for solutions or alternative responses to the "problems" presented.

Performative Re-presentations

Following the Popular Theatre work with students, my interpretation of what we did, for the purposes of my dissertation, began with a process of recursive writing. To talk about our work, I needed to describe significant moments. I found an appropriate way to do this through writing a series of scripted descriptions or "ethnodramatic" vignettes, depicting salient instances of our work together (see also Conrad, 2002). Based on the audio and videotapes we made, my field notes and journal and students' journals, the scripts depict instances of performative interaction/discussion, the devising process, the scenes that students created and the animation of these scenes including their responses to performances or spect-actor interventions.

My notes and transcriptions served as memory aides, but the scripts are also partly fictionalized (Banks & Banks, 1998) for ethical, thematic and practical/writerly purposes. While the details do not always represent precisely what happened, to the extent to which it is possible, acknowledging that all interpretive work is inherently subjective (Clandinin & Connelley, 1994), I have tried to remain true to the substance of our work, and tried to capture the spirit of the interactions the scripted descriptions depict. For example, the scenes that students created were never formally scripted, but improvised anew each time based on some cursory notes. My scripted recreations of these scenes are compellations based on videotapes of specific performances interwoven with details from other performances of the same scene and discussion that arose on various occasions. As, in any case, no text can claim to be free of the author's subjectivity (Banks & Banks, 1998, p. 13), my scripts are constructions, but self-consciously so. I acknowledge that even in my choices of moments to script and scripts to examine more closely an interpretive process was involved, thus my account of our participatory work is inherently partial.

The scripts are meant to be expressive/evocative rather than just explanatory. They are performative texts that bring the processes of academic interpretation and representation closer to the actual performative events. My series of scripted vignettes describe the process involved in our Popular Theatre project in a way that preserves some of its performative quality. They embody the context and dynamics of the interactions, and preserve some of the authenticity of participants' voices and gestures. These scripts served as an initial level of interpretation for my subsequent interpretation/inquiry.

I offer here an excerpt from one of the vignettes I wrote by way of example. I chose this moment to share because of the intriguing questions it raised. One of the scenes that students created, which we called "*The Bus Trip*," was based on an incident that occurred at the school the previous year, involving many of my students. Our scene depicted a group of students illicitly drinking alcohol on the bus ride home from a class trip. In devising the scene, students took on the roles of characters and improvised the situation. The excerpt below shows a moment we enacted between two young men whose idea it was to buy the alcohol. This was an out-scene (a common improvised drama technique), a behind the scenes look at the original scene they created about the bus trip. In the midst of our re-enactment, in the role as facilitator or Joker (Boal, 1992), I stopped the action temporarily to question the actors in character, to delve deeper into the moment of decision making and the motivation underlying their choice:

(The bus stops at the rest stop and they all get off. Shadzz and Daryl meet on the sidewalk.)

Shadzz: *(to Daryl in character)* So give me some money, man.

Daryl: What for?

Shadzz: I'm gonna get the stuff, remember?

Daryl: Na, forget it.

Shadzz: Come'on man you said back there that you wanted to.

Daryl: . . . I don't know . . .

Shadzz: Come'on, it's just around the corner. I'll go get it and bring it back here.

Daryl: Na . . .

Shadzz: What's the matter? Nobody's gonna know.

Daryl: I don't know Shadzz.

Shadzz: Come'on, Daryl.

Daryl: Okay, what the hell . . . Here. *(Daryl gives Shadzz some money.)*

Teacher:*(Interrupting the improvisation)* Stop it there for a minute. Daryl, I want to ask your character a question . . . You hesitated to give him the money. Why?

Daryl: I wasn't sure if I wanted to risk it.

Teacher: So, is there risk involved in what you're doing here?

Daryl: Ya . . .

Teacher: Go on.

Daryl: Well, we're kinda breaking the rules.

Teacher: And where's the risk in that?

Daryl: Well, we might get caught.

Shadzz: And expelled.

Teacher: So there may be negative consequences to what you're doing? . . . Why do you do it?

Daryl: I don't know?

Teacher: Shadzz, what about your character? (*Shadzz thinks about it.)*

Shadzz: I don't know, just for the rush, I guess.

Teacher: For the rush? Is that what risk-taking about? Is that why someone might drink booze on a bus trip?

Shadzz: Ya, it's fun.

Teacher: *(Addressing other students on stage and in the audience.)* Does doing something risky give you a rush?

(Echoes of agreement around the room.)

Students' responses to my questions about risk-taking led me to a further investigation of youth and risk. In other papers, I explored compelling theories on adolescent risk-taking (Lyng, 1993), performative resistance (Scott, 1990), and psychoanalytic interpretations of self-destructive behaviour (Copjec, 1994) that provided insight. An emerging realization that my interest in "at-risk" was based on a desire to better understand my own risky experiences as a youth led to an autoethnographic inquiry (Conrad, 2003; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). The recovery of a collection of artifacts from my past (Slattery, 2001) and stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, 2000) of my youthful risk-taking experiences resonated with what the students had said and what theories were revealing.

Conclusion

Combined, my interpretation of our Popular Theatre work, my theoretical investigations on youth and risk and my autoethnographic understandings provide a layered exploration of youth behaviour. This allowed me to re-frame the concept "at-risk" (Roman, 1996) privileging youths' perceptions of their behaviour. Together, the Popular Theatre work with students, and my interpretation of it, present a counter-narrative (Foucault, 1977) that interrupts the "common sense" or taken-for-granted understandings of "at-risk," providing a more complex picture than one of deviance and deficiency currently suggested. I hope a better understanding of youth and risk that more fully reflects their reality may better respond to their needs. My doctoral study affirms the potential of Popular Theatre as a participatory, performative research method based on the new insight and critical understanding it has yielded (Denzin 1997a; Lather, 1986) for my students and I.

Notes

[1] I find the label "at-risk" extremely problematic. It is used in mainstream literature in education, health care and criminal justice to talk about youth who already have or are at risk of failing, dropping out of school and being unemployed/able, in danger of behaviour related medical problems, injury or death, in trouble with the law or engaged in criminal activity. The fact that the label portrays these youth as deficient or deviant is a problem that I attempt to address in my research. I am particularly disturbed by the way in which being an "at-risk" youth in Alberta correlates to a large degree with being Aboriginal. Aboriginal students in Alberta are among those most often labeled "at-risk" of dropping out of school (Alberta Learning 2001). Tragically, among the youth deemed "at-risk" with whom I have worked in the inner-city, a young offender center, this rural community and communities in the Northwest Territories, a large percentage have been Aboriginal.

[2] Popular Theatre is the term I use to talk about a politically motivated type of participatory theatre alternately referred to and/or closely allied to Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (1979/1974); community theatre (in Britain) or community-based performance elsewhere (Haedicke, & Nellhaus, 2001); applied theatre (Taylor, 2002); developmental theatre in the developing world; some forms of documentary theatre, collective creation or sociodrama. Similar methods are employed in psychodrama or drama therapy contexts (Boal, 1995; Cohen-Cruz, & Schutzman, 1994). Within drama/theatre-in-education it is a form of issues-based, socially critical or critically reflective drama (Errington, 1993).

[3] Popular education is alternatively known as people's education or education for self-reliance (Africa), education for mass mobilization (Asia) cultural animation (Europe) and transformational education (North America). The Highlander Research and Education Centre (2003), a popular education and research organization in Tennessee, U.S.A., was established as early as 1932 and still sponsors educational programs and research into community problems. Catalyst Centre (2003) in Toronto, a non-profit workers co-op, Mandala Centre (2003) in Washington, and the Centre for Popular Education, University of Technology Sydney (2003) promote popular education, research and community development to advance positive social change.

[4] While Popular Theatre takes various forms, Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* is perhaps one of the best known with organizations around the world practicing adaptations of these techniques including the Center of the Theatre of the Oppressed (2003) in Rio and Paris; FORMAAT in Holland; Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed (2003) based at the University of Omaha; Theatre of the Oppressed Laboratory (2003) in New York; Mandala Centre (2003) Seattle, Washington; Headlines Theatre (2003) in Vancouver; Rohd's (1998) Hope is Vital (HIV) program; New York University's Creative Arts Team (2003; Rinherd, 1992); and the Centre for Applied Theatre Research in Australia (Taylor, 2002). Further approaches to *Theatre of the Oppressed* are described in Cohen-Cruz & Schutzman's (1994) *Playing Boal: Theatre, Therapy, Activism.* Other forms of Popular Theatre are explored in Prentki & Selman's (2000) *Popular Theatre in Political Culture: Britain and Canada in Focus.*

[5] The Highlander Research and Education Centre (2003) and the Society for Participatory Research in Asia (2003) are amongst the organizations that promote participatory research. Orlando Fals-Borda, a leading figure in the development of participatory research in Columbia, calls his line of research participatory action research. Participatory research also allies with socially critical action research (Tripp, 1990) and transformative research (Deshler & Selener, 1991).

[6] In the past few years I have attended presentations at conferences and read about research using forms including: reader's theatre, poetry, photography, music, collage, drawing, sculpture, quilting, stained glass, performance and dance. For examples see Diamond & Mullen (1999) also recent special issues of journals dedicated to arts-based research including Qualitative Inquiry Vol. 9 No. 2, The Alberta Journal of Educational Research Vol. 48 No. 3, The Journal of Curriculum Theorizing Vol. 17 No. 2, and the Arts-based Approaches to Educational Research Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association website at www.usd.edu/aber.

[7] Mimesis, the human faculty for imitation or representation of reality, as it is put to use in Popular Theatre and performance ethnography, has ethical implications which I explore in relation to my research in detail elsewhere.

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Part III – Reconceptualizing "At-Risk"

. . . Discussions regarding research methodology are valuable towards expanding the repertoire of qualitative methods available to researchers. I valued reading about methods employed by other researchers as I was preparing to embark on mine.

The next section, Part III of the dissertation gets to the heart of the study in addressing the label "at-risk." Paper 3, From At-Risk to Risk-taking: A Review of Literature, is a literature review about "at-risk." I waded through a profusion of mainstream literature on "at-risk" in the fields of education, health care and criminal justice that uses the label based on a deficit model. It came as no surprise when youth told me they did not like the label. I also came across many critiques of school practices and social structures that put youth "at-risk." My review took me through reproduction theory, resistance theory, various identity theories and theories of risk-taking and landed on a social psychological theory of risk-taking called Edgework . . .

Paper 3: From At-risk to Risk-taking: A Literature Review

Introduction

My interest in investigating "at-risk," grows out of my work with youth so deemed, at inner-city high schools, where I first heard the term applied; at a youth drop in centre; at a young offender facility; and in two First Nations communities in the Northwest Territories, where despite the efforts of the teachers, the students and the community, students consistently failed to meet the school's expectations for achievement. On several occasions, youth have indicated to me that they find the label "at-risk" offensive. Recently I have come to appreciate my desire to better understand "at-risk" as based in my own risky experiences as a youth. My intention in this review of literature is not to describe, label, predict, find causes for or solutions to at-riskness, but to better understand the implications of the label as applied to youth. I investigate and problematize the concept "at-risk," and reflect on the experiences of youth commonly labelled "at-risk," in hopes of better addressing the educational needs of all youth.

In Search of a Definition of "At-risk"

I do not like the label "at-risk," or the practice of labelling in general. Yet, as this label and others (high risk youth, early school leavers, dropouts, problem youth, delinquents) abound in the literature about youth who do not meet schools' and society's expectations of them, it is important to problematize such labels rather than applying them unproblematically or simply dismissing them.

The first question that arises concerning the label "at-risk" is: "At-risk" of what? The term is commonly used in literature in the field of education, to identify students who are potentially "at-risk" of school failure or leaving school before graduation, or who are already failing or have dropped out, on the premise that school failure or dropping out leads to further risk. Studies indicate a correlation between the educational definition of "at-risk," and youth who, from a healthcare standpoint, engage in high risk behaviour, such as substance abuse, risky sexual activity or drinking and driving (Dryfoos, 1993; Gascoigne & Kerr, 1996; Grunbaum, et al., 2000; Irwin, 1993; Machamer & Gruber, 1998) and youth who, from a criminal justice perspective, engage in illegal activity, such as drug use, gang involvement, violence or vandalism (Hagan, 1997; Hawkins, 1996; Juvenile Justice Comprehensive Strategy Task Force, 2000; Tanner, Hartnagel & Krahn, 1995). Within the fields of medicine and law, "low school achievement and lack of basic skills are always included in analysis of the characteristics of high-risk youth, sometimes as antecedents or precursors, sometimes as consequences, and often as both" (Dryfoos, 1993, p. 132). So, as well as being "at-risk" of school failure or leaving school early, "at-risk" is used to describe youth who engage in or may potentially engage in behaviours that put them "at-risk" of mental health problems, physical injury, fatality, run-ins with the law or incarceration.[1]

While my investigation focuses on the educational context, I want to understand the "at-risk" behaviours of youth in general by referring to various situations involving risk. While current research tends towards looking at the commonalities and interrelation of "at-risk" behaviours within various domains (Irwin, 1993), researchers also acknowledge that the unique characteristics of specific behaviours may be important in explaining them (Anderson, et al., 1993). I am sensitive to the concern that a definition applied too widely loses its meaning (Tidwell & Garrett, 1994), but as my intention here is not to predict or provide solutions to at-riskness, but to better understand the implications of the label, a broad definition is useful.

Tidwell and Garrett (1994) argue that the “at-risk” designation is misleading when applied to youth who are already in trouble. Though they acknowledge that once an individual is in trouble the potential for further trouble exists, they suggest that calling these youth “at-risk” avoids discussion of the dangers already present in their lives. Rather, they call for a definition of “at-risk,” which maintains the future orientation of the word “risk” to predict behaviour. However, the practices of labelling and categorization to predict behaviour have been shown to generate a spiral of low expectations, low self-esteem and a “blame the victim” mentality, detrimental to future success (Marchesi, 1998; Tanner, Hartnagel & Krahn, 1995; National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1985).

While the label “at-risk” undoubtedly has negative connotations, it does aptly apply to the threatening quality of the situations in which it is used (Tidwell and Garret, 1994). Likewise Baruth and Manning (1995) believe that “at-risk” conveys the appropriate sense of urgency required in meeting these youths’ needs. Recently, the terms “placed “at-risk”” or “put “at-risk”[2] have come into use in educational contexts. These terms attempt to remove blame for failing to meet society’s expectations from the individual, placing it instead on the inherent social or structural conditions that engender at-riskness. I use the terms "placed or put at-risk" and "labelled, deemed or called at-risk" to talk about the youth experiences I am investigating, insofar as there are commonalities in these experiences. I want to avoid placing blame on youth, but I also want to avoid seeing them only as victims.

"At-risk" – The "Problem"

Concern over students dropping out of school has been ongoing since the 1950s yet dropout rates since that time have actually been slowly declining (Tanner, Hartnagel & Krahn, 1995). Over the years dropout statistics have been exaggerated or minimized based on agendas of various funding agencies. Differences in measurement - what is included or left out of the definition of a dropout - produce different results. "The current best estimate of the proportion of Canadian youth who do not complete high school is about 20 per cent" (Tanner, Hartnagel & Krahn, 1995, p. 150). Of early school leavers, about half return to school and a significant number of these eventually do obtain their high school diplomas (Education Culture & Tourism Division Statistics Canada, 1991).

In the wake of two economic recessions, much of the concern about youth not completing school is based on the logic of economics. Two decades ago, a prominent U.S. study, *A Nation "At-risk"* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), warned that students were no longer internationally competitive due to unchallenging curricula, declining learning levels, low standards, lack of commitment on the part of students, weaknesses in teaching and poor teacher education. The study called for reforms to remedy the educational deficiencies that threatened the nation's prosperity and freedom. Business organizations in the U.S. saw this as their opportunity for increased involvement in educational policy development to meet their needs. In the last decade, several studies have investigated the effects of dropping out on Canada's economic security (Bloom, 1990; Canadian Labour Market and Productivity Centre, 1993; Economic Council of Canada, 1992; Porter, 1991; Lefleur, 1992). High unemployment rates, a low skilled labour market, welfare dependency, heightened demands on the social system, a drain on public funds, lost revenue in the form of earnings and unrealized tax revenues, increased burdens on individual and corporate taxpayers, reduced international competitiveness, lost productivity and a reduction in the flow of consumer goods have all been cited as causes for concern. However, reduced dropout rates do not automatically translate into economic security (Tanner, Hartnagel & Krahn, 1995), and as Giroux (1992) argues, education should not be "instrumentalized" to serve any predetermined agenda. Schools should not be "merely boot camps for the economy" (p. 14). A survey conducted ten years after *A Nation "At-risk"* (Lund & Wild, 1993), found a lack of measurable improvement based on business involvement in schools, yet the trend continues.

In today's so-called "risk society" (Bessant, Hil & Watts, 2003), economic concerns, along with fear that the criminal behaviour of dropouts is a threat to society, and that a poorly educated population unable to make informed choices is a threat to democracy, have created a "moral panic" over youth not completing school (Tanner, Hartnagel & Krahn, 1995). Society's fears and the call for educational "reforms" to address economic problems, however, divert attention and resources away from the individual and social problems related to not completing school. Researchers suggest that we must consider the disadvantages that low school achievement or dropping out can bring to individuals' future lives - disadvantages such as limited resources or prospects, employment instability, unemployment or low skilled labour, low wages, poor working conditions, job dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, feelings of hopelessness and despair, poverty (Tanner, Hartnagel & Krahn, 1995; Hagan, 1997) - exacerbating their already marginalized positions in society. In this way, it is suggested, dropping out is in fact part of a process that reproduces patterns of social inequality (Apple, 1995; Giroux, 1992; McLaren, 1998; Willis, 1977).

Correlated with the dropout problem, the concern over delinquent or criminal behaviour of some youth has caused a "moral panic" that calls for reforms to the juvenile justice system - a lowering of the age for young offenders to be tried in adult court and stricter penalties for major crimes. Depictions of "youth in crisis," including teen violence, delinquency and gang involvement, in the media and popular culture, "have been mobilized by the neo-conservative Right for the articulation of a 'moral panic' [in order to] maintain their hegemony through crisis" (jagodzinski, 1997, p. 202). Rather than helping youth come to terms with the difficulties they face in today's world, adults often blame youth for society's problems (Giroux, 1996). In the U.S., adults' abandonment of youth is demonstrated by decreased social support for youth in the areas of social benefits, education and employment, low public concern for youth, an increase in child poverty, while adults are richer than ever, increased incarceration of youth, especially minority youth, and a campaign blaming youth for social ills including the "War on Drugs," the panic over the breakdown of "family values," and youth crime (Males, 1996). In this sense, "at-risk" talk becomes an attempt by experts to control perceived social chaos (Bessant, Hil & Watts, 2003).

Factors that Place Youth "At-risk"

In the context of much research on youth deemed "at-risk," risk factors are cited as aspects in the lives of youth that place them "at-risk." In the identification of risk factors, education borrows from research on delinquency where the notion of "risk factors" has been found useful in suggesting causality towards delinquency prevention. Risk factors are seen as antecedents to high-risk behaviour, so interventions addressing risk factors hope to eliminate risk behaviours (Dryfoos, 1993).

An extensive list of risk factors cited in various Canadian and U.S. sources (Alberta Learning, 2001; British Columbia Juvenile Crime Prevention Project, 1984; Catalano & Hawkins, 1995; Colvin & Pauly, 1883; Fine, 1986; Grunbaum et al., 2000; Hixson & Tinzmann, 1990; Juvenile Justice Comprehensive Strategy Task Force, 2000; Nettles, Jones & Mucherah, 2000; Tanner, Hartnagel & Krahn, 1995; Smale, 2001; National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1985) are categorized as individual, family, peer group, school, community and societal/structural factors. Risk factors include everything from low self-esteem, family conflict and negative peer influence, to inappropriate curricula, violence within the community and systemic racism.

The risk factors are based on characteristics of youth who have been unsuccessful at school, dropped out of school, are dependant on social services, unemployed or in trouble with the law; on this basis youth are defined as "at-risk" because, statistically, youth in these categories are more likely to do the same. The discussion around risk factors has validity in so far as the voices of parents, teachers, social workers, medical workers and law enforcement officers, as well youth themselves confirm that these are indeed factors that influence the behaviours in question (Britt, 1995; Cloutier, 1997; Deyhle, 1998; Downie; 1994; Fine, 1986; Miron & Lauria, 1995; Smale, 2001; Tanner, Hartnagel & Krahn, 1995; Wheedlock, 1985).

Research suggests there is no single factor that places students "at-risk", but a complex, interwoven web of causality. Combinations of factors provide indicators of risk and the more factors at work the greater the risk. Factors compound, so that one factor may lead to others. Family conflict, for example, can lead to failure at school, which in turn can lead to delinquency. Factors interact at various levels (individual, family, peer, school, community, societal/structural), so that an individual's low self-esteem may be caused by discrimination by peers or teachers, discrimination in the community against the individual's family, exclusion of the individual's culture in the school curriculum, and systemic racism in society. Thus, a male student, as described in Deyhle's (1998) study, may be failing high school due to truancy, being occupied with music and drug use with peers rather than attending classes, which he finds irrelevant to his life in any case. School disregards his culture; nor does graduation guarantee him a job in his impoverished community. His drug use may follow a generational pattern of substance abuse, his family having faced generations of racial/cultural discrimination as well as poverty. Eventually he drops out.

Similarly, another student's lack of success at school leaves her grades behind her age mates. She finds her classmates immature and snobbish. Dropping out gets her kicked out of home. This forces her to make the transition from school to the world of employment, which means low skilled labour, soon followed by marriage and children (Tanner, Hartnagel & Krahn, 1995). Another young woman's family recently immigrated to the U.S. Now her mother is dying of lupus. She is needed as a translator for the family and is forced to stay home from school to look after younger siblings (Fine, 1986). Stories like these pervade the literature, each story involving a combination of circumstances that follow their own unpredictable path towards success or failure.

The list of factors that place youth "at-risk" is so extensive and interwoven that there is a tendency to assert that all youth in today's society are "at-risk" in one way or another (Hixson & Tinzmann, 1990). While this approach advocates equal attention to all youth, it draws attention away from those for whom structural barriers have most consistently stood in the way of academic development, quality of life and well being. In untangling the web of causality, it is necessary to distinguish between symptoms and root causes. While youth themselves report various personal, family and school related reasons for dropping out of school or engaging in high risk or delinquent activity, demographically, studies have found that the major factors in determining risk amongst youth are low socioeconomic status and racial/cultural minority status (Alberta Learning, 2001; Dentler & Warshauer, 1965; Downie, 1994; Education Culture & Tourism Division Statistics Canada, 1991; Fine, 1986; Machamer & Gruber, 1998; British Columbia Juvenile Crime Prevention Project, 1984; Juvenile Justice Comprehensive Strategy Task Force, 2000; Roderick, 1993; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Tanner, Hartnagel & Krahn, 1995; National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1985).

Studies reveal high drop out rates among socioeconomically disadvantaged or minority students, particularly Black and Hispanic students in the U.S., and Aboriginal students in Canada (Alberta Learning, 2001; Hixson & Tinzmann, 1990; Fine, 1986; Tanner, Hartnagel & Krahn, 1995; Makokis, 2000; Miron & Lauria, 1995; National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1985). In Alberta, "The Aboriginal population has historically experienced higher early school leaving rates compared to the general population" (Alberta Learning, 2001, p.16). Being male, Aboriginal, in a special program such as ESL, special education or Integrated Occupational Program, are among the greatest factors putting students "at-risk" of dropping out of school (Alberta Learning, 2001). Aboriginal students are "at-risk" due to historical, cultural and interpersonal reasons including curriculum that is not culturally relevant, incongruity between the values of school and home culture, negative labelling of Aboriginal students, the small number of Aboriginal teachers as leaders and role models, and the failure to involve Aboriginal communities in schooling (Makokis, 2000). While it is true that White middle-class youth do fail at school, dropout, and engage in high risk or criminal activity, research indicates that the majority of youth labelled "at-risk" are those who are marginalized or socially disadvantaged.

While lists of risk factors may be useful in shedding light on the lived reality of youth deemed "at-risk," such factors are more commonly used to determine causes of youth's failure to meet society's expectations in an attempt to re-establish conformity to these expectations. When causes are presumed to be based on individual, family or community characteristics, a "blame the victim" stance is adopted and solutions are sought, which work towards reintegrating the individual into existing social structures. Risk factors are also used to predict which students are potentially "at-risk," perpetuating the labelling process shown to be detrimental (Marchesi, 1998; Tanner, Hartnagel & Krahn, 1995; National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1985). Besides its role in uncritically maintaining the status quo and perpetuating negative practices, the danger of relying too much on the discourse of risk factors is that the level of generalization is really too high to provide effective direction in addressing the situation it attempts to address (Hixson & Tinzmann, 1990). Rather than focusing on providing remediation/reform programs, or prevention programs for youth deemed "at-risk," should we not rather be working towards providing nurturing and secure environments for all youth, where such risks are not a threat?

Further, more detailed discussion of risk factors, categories of risk factors (individual, family, peer, school, community, structural) and some implications for policymaking and program development follow.

A Deficit Model of Risk and Resilience

Historically, identification of students deemed "delinquent" was largely based on the socio-demographic characteristics (race, language, culture, values, attitudes and behaviours) of youth, their families and communities that were incongruous with the dominant white cultures that schools served (Hixson & Tinzmann, 1990; Goodlad & Keating, 1990). This deficit model saw at-riskness as arising from deficiencies in students, their families and communities. In this sense, terms like "at-risk" and the underlying attitudes that often accompany them are pejorative and discriminatory. It is important to acknowledge that the concept "at-risk" is historically based in racist and bigoted attitudes.

More recently, the tendency has been for schools to attempt to predict which students are most likely to have difficulty at school based on risk factors. The intention is prevention, but students are still implicitly blamed for factors over which they have no control. Alternatively, schools wait for problems to occur before describing students as "at-risk," and implementing remediation. While this approach tries to avoid bias predictors, attempts at intervention often occur too late (Hixson, & Tinzmann, 1990). Both these approaches adopt a deficit model of at-riskness by focusing on ways that students need to change in order fit into existing school structures.

Attempts to solve the "at-risk" problem in the school context, take the form of tracking or ability grouping, add-on or pullout programs, further fragmenting the school experience, stigmatizing youth who are already struggling, and isolating individuals from their peers. Similarly, in the community health or social services contexts, intervention programs are most often "categorical," focusing on specific rather than interrelated behaviours (Dryfoos, 1993). In either case, the onus for solving the problem is placed on the individual.

Similarly, the literature on resilience in education is based on a deficit model. Resilience is commonly defined as the ability to bounce back. In the field of child psychology, the concept of resilience was first employed to talk about children who bounced back from experiences of trauma. More recently, resilience has been used in work with disadvantaged populations including youth deemed "at-risk." In educational contexts, the discourse on resilience, focuses on students who have academic, emotional and social competence despite factors that may place them "at-risk" (Brown, Benard & D'Emidio-Caston, 2001; Luthar, 1991; Martineau, 1999; Nettles, Mucherah & Jones, 2000; Withers & Russell, 2001). In this sense, resilience is seen as a characteristic of an individual that leads to success in school and in life. However, resilience has come to be accepted as the social norm of our dominant society (Martineau, 1999). Thus, individuals who are not resilient are seen as deficient.

Resilience research involves prevention or intervention strategies that attempt to teach students resilience to alleviate the negative impact of risk factors. Ultimately, the discourse on resilience places the responsibility for overcoming obstacles on the individual – hoping to teach marginalized youth to conform to the norms of the school and the dominant culture. Such programs do little to change the underlying patterns or circumstances, the systemic inequalities that keep students from succeeding. The concept of resilience suggests that schools can protect students from risk factors initiated elsewhere, but places little responsibility on schools for contributing to putting students “at-risk”.

This deficit model or risk and resilience produces the “blame the victim” mentality discussed earlier – putting the blame for lack of success on the individual, their family and community (Fine, 1986; Hixson, & Tinzmann, 1990; McLaren, 1998; Tanner, Hartnagel & Krahn, 1995; National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1985). Furthermore, the processes of predicting or describing, and subsequent attempts at solving the problem of poor achievement through prevention or intervention, leads to labelling, low teacher expectations, internalization of negative attitudes on the part of students, learned helplessness[4], and self-fulfilling prophecies. McLaren (1998) calls this “psychologizing” student failure, which is part of the hidden curriculum that “relieves teachers of the need to engage in pedagogical self-scrutiny or any serious critique of their personal roles within the school, and the school’s role within the wider society . . . [it] indicts the student while simultaneously protecting the social environment from sustained criticism” (p. 210). Approaches that attempt to address risk factors often do not promote change to the regular program or encourage educators to look at ways in which schools might be putting students “at-risk.”

School and Structural Factors that Place Students “At-risk”

Alternative approaches to addressing students’ low achievement and early school leaving suggest a look at school factors and/or structural factors as potential causes for placing students “at-risk.” The school factor approach moves away from blaming students and their families and asks how schools might make a difference. It sees early school leaving as a process rather than an event – a process of gradual disengagement with school in which school structures play a role (Alberta, 2001; Tanner, Hartnagel & Krahn, 1995; National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1985).

Many studies examine school factors that are detrimental to students being successful at school (Alberta Learning, 2001; Britt, 1995; Curtis, Livingston & Smaller, 1992; Fine, 1986; Gatto, 1992; Hixson, & Tinzmann, 1990; Miron & Lauria, 1995). This approach places responsibility on schools as well as individuals and their families for low achievement. Several studies cite students' reports of school factors as their reasons for leaving school (Britt, 1995; Fine, 1986; Miron & Lauria, 1995, Tanner, Hartnagel & Krahn, 1995; National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1985). Early school leavers complain of inflexible program choices; rigid schedules; restrictive, authoritarian environments; bad relationships with teachers and other students; discrimination; curricula that has no relevance to their lives; and ineffective teaching methods. Some early school leavers reported that they were advised to drop out by school counsellors, or they were simply taken off the register when their absences exceeded the allowed limit.

Amongst the literature on dropouts, early works as well as more recent ones, including a major study conducted by the Canadian government in the last decade (Culture & Tourism Division Statistics Canada, 1991), end their analysis of why students leave school early with an acknowledgement of school related reasons for students leaving school. However, many of these authors put little responsibility on schools for solving the problem of "at-riskness" (Alberta Advanced Education & Career Development, 1993; Cervantes, 1969; Clarke, et al., 1954; Elliot & Voss, 1974; Downie; 1994; Ede, 1967; Education Culture & Tourism Division Statistics Canada, 1991; Gilbert, et al., 1993; Machamer & Gruber, 1998; Scragg; 1968). Others to a greater or lesser extent, recommended school changes including: implementation of remedial and prevention programs (although these have been shown to be detrimental); lower class sizes; higher standards; re-entry programs for school leavers returning to school; better vocational, occupational, work experience and technical programs; better counselling/guidance services including peer counselling; positive school climate; more caring teachers and supportive administrators; more parental involvement; more individualized attention; and increased participation in extracurricular programs (Alberta Learning, 2001; Baruth & Manning, 1995; Rhodes, et al., 1971; Sagor, 1998; Smale, 2001; Wells, 1990). These studies, however, did not critique the structure of the school system as a whole. Yet other studies focused on school factors for addressing the problems calling for more widespread school changes to meet the needs of students (Attenborough, Engel & Martin, 1995; Center on Evaluation and Development Branch, 1987; Dryfoos, 1993; Goodlad & Keating, 1990; Hawkins & Wall, 1980; Hixson & Tinzmann, 1990; Marchesi, 1998).

The authors who emphasize school factors that place students "at-risk," suggest that schools must use what has been learned from the discourse on school factors to restructure the school system at all levels, to eliminate barriers that prevent students from succeeding. They call for broad changes in policy, organizational structures and patterns of behaviour to meet the needs of students, including increased government funding and support for public schools; the rooting out of discriminatory practices; a redefinition of the cultural norms of schools, such as how we measure success; a refocusing of the priorities of instructional programs to include such skills as the construction of knowledge, problem solving/decision making, collaboration with others, and life-long learning; and renewed relationships between home, school and the larger community (Hixson & Tinzmann, 1990). Hixson and Tinzmann suggest that neither can schools be held solely responsible for solving the dropout problem, as there are factors in students' lives over which schools have little control. Rather, responsibility must be shared amongst students, families and schools. In this sense, it is not students who are "at-risk," but the educational environments, which lead to consistent failure.

Still other studies take the analysis beyond school factors to look at factors in the very structures of our society that place students "at-risk" (Apple, 1995; Bigelow, 1996; Cole, Kemmis & Suggett, 1983; Cloutier, 1997; Fine, 1986; Giroux, 1992; McLaren, 1998; Pellicano, 1987; Tanner, Hartnagel & Krahn, 1995). These studies acknowledge schools as embedded in a larger society, not ahistorical institutions. Researchers and theorists who adopt a socially-critical perspective of schooling claim that schools are institutions that help reproduce existing social structures – the gender, class, and race/ethnic relations that organize our society[5]. They believe that schools are constructed around the ideology of the dominant culture and that this ideology is maintained through a state of hegemony, through consensual social practices and social structures, including schools. Through hegemony, the oppressed unknowingly participate in their own oppression (McLaren, 1998).

Many studies have tried to expose the role that structural factors play in schooling in reproducing social inequalities (Anyon, 1981; Curtis, Livingstone & Smaller, 1992; Fine, 1986; Miron and Lauria, 1995; National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1985; Willis, 1977). "Society creates schools in certain ways to meet its goals and expectations, thus creating environments in which certain children are 'at-risk'" (Richardson and Colfer cited in Hixson & Tinzmann, 1990, p. 4). Reproduction theory sees the dropout phenomenon itself as a process by which social inequalities are reproduced (Giroux, 1992; Tanner, Hartnagel & Krahn 1995; National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1985; Willis, 1977). Thereby, poor, working class and minority students are taught in such a way, via the overt and hidden curricula, as to maintain their marginalized status (Anyon, 1981), or are actually pushed out of schools, perpetuating their marginalized status.

In Tanner, Hartnagel & Krahn's study (1995), school leavers cited school related factors as well as personal or family related reasons for leaving school. Yet, the authors believe, these factors may have structural components since wealthy and middle-class students usually attend better schools with more resources, and family and personal problems may be related to poverty and/or systemic discrimination. Tanner, Hartnagel & Krahn citing Bourdieu argue that "middle-class youth bring more 'cultural capital' to school: they are more likely to speak like their teachers, to be comfortable in a verbal and symbolic environment, to already know something about the subjects being taught, to have additional skills (e.g., music training), and to have access to educational resources in their homes" (Bourdieu cited in Tanner, Hartnagel & Krahn, 1995, p. 16).

Fine (1986) questions the sense in looking for individual causes for the dropout phenomenon, which is "mass experienced." She insists on looking for structural and social explanations for the high dropout rate and calls for the transformation of unjust economic and social arrangements in society – a redistribution of power and resources. "At-risk" then, is a function of inadequacies at various levels of interaction – a combination of factors in the lives of students, in the educational environment, and in society at large. Thus, society as a whole must be held accountable for failing its youth. If there is a solution to be found, it lies with us all.

"At-risk" Behaviour as Youth Resistance

Some students deemed "at-risk" are said to be (Willis, 1977) pushed out of the education system that is weighted against them due to multiple disadvantages, or if they actively reject the values and goals of the middle-class education system. Resistance theory[6], from a post-Marxist perspective, sees some student behaviour deemed "at-risk" as resistance directed towards the authority of the school, the alienating and repressive education system, and the inequitable structures of our capitalist social order that shape schools (Apple, 1995; Giroux, 1992; Willis, 1977). Resistance is a desperate grab for power by the powerless, a challenge to the hegemony of the dominant ideology, a sign of hope that social transformation is possible[7].

Many studies have shown that students do indeed resist schooling and the culture of schools (Anfara, 1995; Britt, 1995; Deyhle, 1998; Fine, 1986; Miron & Lauria, 1995; Tanner, Hartnagel & Krahn, 1995; Willis, 1977; National Coalition of Advocates for Students; 1985). Students with low achievement at school and students who have dropped out comment that they hate school, that "it sucks," that they dislike certain practices, teachers, subjects or classmates. Some students who drop out of school say they disliked school so much that they saw dropping out as the solution, not the problem (Tanner, Hartnagel & Krahn, 1995). Student behaviour at school considered resistant, including disengagement, truancy, skipping classes, refusal to work, unruliness, making fun of teachers and a focus on peer cultural pursuits at the expense of school work, is typical of students deemed "at-risk" (Field & Olafson, 1999). Fine (1986) suggests that whether students reject school values, leave to fulfill family or economic obligations, give up on the promise of schooling, or are thrown out, there is, in these experiences, an implicit critique of, or a feeling of being defeated by, the structural context of schools.

Studies confirm that student resistance to schooling exists, yet according to Kingston (1986) the evidence fails to show that student resistance is either politicized or collective - containing the seeds for an effective challenge to the existing social order. Even amongst studies, whose authors claim that students' resistance is politicized and collective, the resistance has shown little hope of social transformation.

Even students who had expressed a dislike of school, once they realized the consequences of dropping out, having experienced difficulty in the labour market, said they wanted to resume their education to get a better job (Tanner, Hartnagel & Krahn, 1995). According to the authors, this indicated that they had not rejected the educational value system; they were not antagonistic against schooling. They were not rebellious or politicized youth reacting against society, but highly integrated into the dominant value system. Their goals included finding a good job, having money, material possessions and a family. The youth who dropped out indicated their desire to continue their education, not by returning to a regular high school, but by some alternative program – correspondence, a second chance program or upgrading at a community college. They valued education in relation to employment and the benefits it could provide.

Similarly, while students in a low socioeconomic neighbourhood school claimed to dislike school, they held fast to the "American Dream" – the beliefs and values of the dominant culture which assert that a good education ensures a good job, money, material possessions, family and happiness (Anfara, 1995). In this sense, it is possible that resistance to schools is not necessarily connected to resistance to the larger social order (Kingston, 1986). In another case, the resistance of a group of junior high students (Everhart, 1983), was seen as less an active revolt against the unfairness of school structures, as an escape from their anxieties resulting from it. Everhart claims that student resistance "gives the impression of power while ignoring the conditions under which relative powerlessness exists" (p. 250). Cloutier (1997) saw the behaviour of the inner city students with whom he worked not as resistance, but as adaptation to the youths' home and street environments. Similarly, competitiveness, aggressiveness and crime amongst already disadvantaged young men was seen as a sign of adaptation rather than pathology (Wilson & Daly, 1993).

Other studies conclude that students' resistance towards school, rather than resisting the dominant ideology, works to perpetuate it (Deyhle, 1998; Willis, 1977.) Student resistance, which often leads to dropping out or being pushed out of school, ultimately helps to reproduce inequitable structures in society just as thoroughly as hegemony. Willis's (1977) ethnography of a group of school boys shows how the resistant attitudes of the "lads," ensured their incorporation into the working class. The resistant behaviour of the "lads" in their last years at school are documented, along with their subsequent struggles with unemployment, employment instability, low paying, low skilled, manual labour and dissatisfying jobs.

A group of Navajo youth consciously resisted their assimilation into the white culture of their school, through activities considered fringe within their communities - breakdancing and heavy metal music (Deyhle, 1998). They resented their marginalization and saw little relevance in school for their lives. Eventually their heavy metal T-shirts and black clothes were banned from the school, branding them outcasts. Despite that they were able to express their resistance in political and collective terms, their behaviour, which culminated in dropping out, ultimately contributed to their continued marginalization, Deyhle claimed. Hence, while some students resist schooling, and some are even able to articulate their critique, their behaviour does little to disrupt the processes of social reproduction, and shows little hope for the social transformation promised by critical resistance theory.

Yet some persist in seeing youth resistance as acts of courage or hope for the future, some even calling for the need to educate towards resistance from a socially critical perspective (Anyon, 1981; Deyhle, 1998; Dorney, 1995; Giroux, 1992; Willis, 1977). Postmodern approaches to resistance theory "recognize multiple configurations of authority and embrace various styles of resistance to them" (Ferrell, 1995, p. 76). An examination of acts of performative resistance against dominating forces throughout history shows that subordinated people are not so easily incorporated by the dominant ideology (Scott, 1990). Students are listed amongst examples of individuals and groups that have historically protested their subordination against the odds – peasant uprising, slave rebellions, prison riots. Scott also celebrates the subversive potential of fugitive forms of performative resistance including footdragging, pilfering, grumbling, conning, and gossiping as the "infrapolitics" of the powerless who do not have the luxury of direct confrontation.

In one study, the resistant behaviour of a group of African American students was interpreted as important political work, in the area of identity politics (Miron & Lauria, 1995). Adopting a postmodern definition of identity as socially constructed – multiple, partial and always in process, the authors saw the students' resistance to the racial stereotyping they were experiencing in their New Orleans neighbourhood school as a struggle for identity formation. Students complained that their teachers had low expectations of them, characterizing them as underachievers and deviants. This struggle over identity was seen as a political one, connected to their sense of collective identity embedded in the racial politics of the larger society.

Nevertheless, I take heed of the warning that youth resistance should not be romanticized, celebrated or naturalized (Ferrell, 1995; Field & Olafson, 1999; Lindquist, 1994). As criminologist Ferrell notes, some researchers and theorists, including some on the Left, reject the revolutionary potential of resistance and crime, insisting on attention to the negative consequences of resistance. Ferrell warns against over-applying resistance to all youth activities, making it a vague concept disconnected from the realities of youths' lives, but also warns that resistance should not be so rigidly defined as to fit only with the pre-established agendas of authorities. Expanding on Willis (1977), Ferrell suggests that situating research on resistance in the everyday life experiences of youth in particular cultural and political contexts can avoid romanticizing or too rigidly defining resistance. Ferrell focuses on "various forms of everyday resistance and the situated meanings that surround and define them" (p. 77). In his study of urban graffiti writing as resistance the youth were able to articulate the resistant political intentions behind their graffiti art (Ferrell, 1995).

Youth resistance also has been interpreted as identity formation as youth search for autonomy and their relationship to authority in various contexts

(Kingston, 1986; Miron & Lauria, 1995). Kingston indicates the need to look for social psychological causes of youth resistance as well as political ones. Similarly, Lindquist (1994) calls for the need to listen for the complexity of youth behaviour beyond resistance.

Youth Resistance as Identity Work

Some theories of adolescent risk taking link adolescent identity formation and youth resistance. Yoder (2000), drawing on the work of social psychologists (Erikson, 1975, Marcia, 1966; Côté, 1996), develops an understanding of adolescent identity formation as contextual. Identity formation defined as "a process whereby one first explores one's self and the external environment and then proceeds to commit to various aspects of identity, including career, relationships and ideologies" (Yoder, 2000, p. 98). The separation in our society of adolescence, through restrictions and expectations, from the experience of the adult world of economically relevant work, social roles and relations, however, creates an identity crisis for many youth (Erikson, 1975). Yoder concludes, "the adolescent perception of society as belonging only to adults engenders a resentment that may lead to dropout, anti-social and non-work behaviours that are perceived by adults as deviant and/or rebellious" (p. 99). Since healthy identity formation, according to these social psychological theories, depends on choice, and a sense of self-determination, adolescents unable to influence the social institutions that govern their lives, struggle in forming identities. Because of a deficit of "identity capital," these youth lose direction and become engaged in behaviour that puts them "at-risk" of adverse outcomes (Côté, 1996). Likewise, social barriers such as low socioeconomic or racial/ethnic minority status impede youth from disempowered backgrounds in forming healthy identities (Marcia, 1966).

The Navajo youth in Deyhle's (1998) study struggled for their identities, disconnected from the traditional Navajo culture, in conflict with the dominant Anglo community. The heavy metal culture, to which these youth turned, was seen as a response to a crisis of meaning in their lives. While our society encourages youth to be independent and self-sufficient it does not give them enough guidance. As such, heavy metal music, with lyrics that talk of the dark, brutal facts of life, is a response to individualism turned to isolation and alienation (Arnette, cited in Deyhle, 1998). After losing the sense of validation they hoped to gain through break dancing, Deyhle admits, the Navajo youth in her study gave up on changing the system they rejected, turning instead to heavy metal as a form of protest.

While social psychological processes certainly play a part in influencing youth behaviour, perspectives like those described above again fall into a deficit model. They depict youth as deficient when they do not conform to society's expectations, where "healthy identity formation" means finding one's place in the existing social economic structures. Moreover, they disregard or underestimate youth's own participation or agency in choosing identities that do not conform. Nor do any of the above perspectives attach importance to the benefit or enjoyment that youth gain from their resistant identities that may play a role in motivating "at-risk" behaviour. While retaining a sense of caution regarding the inherent dangers and negative consequences of risk taking, I suggest that some youth behaviour is also about enjoyment that must be acknowledged if not celebrated.

Hagan (1997), drawing on Willis (1977), sees delinquency as a product of a society undergoing a breakdown of conventional institutions (family, religion) for youth to compete for status. He interprets youth's responses, including the responses of Willis's "lads," as a sort of "celebratory denial." "Delinquency is provoked by the social-psychological needs of youth who are unsuccessful in the socioeconomic mobility contest that is at the core of the schooling" (Hagan, 1997, p. 120). Hagan believes delinquent subcultural behaviour may insulate participants from sources of distress, serving as protection, if only temporarily, from the anxieties and frustrations of youth over struggles for status and socio-economic prospects. In this sense, delinquency is youths' group-based solution to their problems.

In response to the "moral panic" towards youth behaviour, Rappers in the U.S., celebrate the very "nihilism that older generations blame them for" (Howe & Strauss, 1993, p. 121). These youth appropriate the moral majority's worst fears of them in forming an identity. This view gives credit to the youth for choosing an identity, even though the identity they choose may not correspond to society's ideals - the expectations of mainstream culture, school, the economic and legal systems, and allows the possibility of youth's enjoyment of these identities.

Research on risk-taking in general (Lopes, 1993; Lyng, 1993) and adolescent risk-taking in particular (Anderson, et al., 1993; Dryfoos, 1993; Gardner, 1993; Irwin, 1993; Millstein, 1993) addresses the issue of agency and acknowledges the positive role that risk-taking can have in people's lives.

"At-risk" or Risk-takers

Acknowledging youth's agency in their risky behaviour compels us to view some youth behaviour not as "at-risk" behaviour, but as voluntary risk-taking. Adolescent risk-taking is accepted to some extent, as a normal and necessary part of adolescent development as teens experiment with behaviours, develop identities, learn how to make decisions and take initiative (Irwin, 1993). In relation to risk-taking, cause for concern from a medial perspective is based on the high incidence of adolescent accidents, suicides and homicides, which are taken to involve behaviours related to choice. Youth are perceived as taking greater risks that lead to negative outcomes, than adults (Gardner, 1993). However, much research on adolescent risk taking focuses on what adults perceive as negative consequences of adolescent behaviour without considering what youth perceive as the positive outcomes of risky behaviour or the negative outcomes of not participating in risky behaviour (Lopes, 1993). Anderson (et al., 1993) suggests that "the time has come to begin asking . . . how does risk taking, even when it involves significant threats . . . play a positive role in development and the mental health of the individual?" (p. 173).

Literature on youth risk-taking commonly describes youth as impulsive, egocentric, sensation seeking, unable to perceive risk accurately and unable to make rational decisions about risk, all signifying some sort of deficit (Millstein, 1993, Anderson, et al, 1993). Psychological theories speculate that youth, based on the nature of their developmental status, may be more likely to perceive themselves invulnerable, less likely to fully imagine risks and future consequences due to lack of experience, or unable to consider the multiple factors involved in risky situations simultaneously. However, studies have failed to show that adolescents perceive risk any differently than adults do (Millstein, 1993). Instead, they have shown that adults and youth alike have an optimistic bias when it comes to their own potentially risky behaviours, both being generally overly optimistic about their own vulnerability compared to others. This optimism may be either self-defensive, to avoid anxiety over negative outcomes, or to enhance or maintain self-esteem, which youth may be more in need of at that stage of their development. Nevertheless, decisions involved in risk taking are not always rational - risk assessment being inherently subjective (Millstein, 1993).

Youth risk-taking can in part be explained by the tendency for humans (and animals) to show preference for immediate versus delayed future rewards (Gardner, 1993). From this perspective, the immediate benefits of youths' behaviour would outweigh any potential benefit in adulthood, and future risks discounted due to youths' sense of uncertainly about their futures. Given the real uncertainty in their lives, having no assurances of what the future holds for them, Gardner sees the decision to engage in risky behaviour as a rational choice for youth. In the language of risk-taking, youth have less to lose by taking risks than adults do. "Discounting the value of the future when young may be neither a perceptual error nor a defect of character, but simply a rational response to uncertainty about the future" (Gardner, 1993, p. 78). Here, youth are seen as individuals, purposeful and goal oriented, attempting to satisfy their needs, interests and desires subject to constraints imposed by their environment and circumstances. Youth risk-taking is simply a trade-off to maximize perceived positive outcomes.

Edgework[8] (Lyng, 1990), a theory of risk-taking used in sociology and criminology, is also useful in understanding the risky behaviour of youth, and in acknowledging their agency in and possible enjoyment of their behaviour. Edgework takes a social psychological approach towards explaining voluntary risk-taking as a sort of resistant identity work.

Edgework – A Theory of Voluntary Risk-taking

Lyng's (1990, 1993) theory of edgework[9] is defined as a kind of "experiential anarchy," in response to social constraints. According to Lyng, edgework's central feature is the negotiation of boundaries or the defining of limits between body/mind, body/technology, sanity/insanity, order/chaos, authority/anarchy, and life/death. Edgework emphasizes the participants' own experiences of the action. The subjective sense of an experience and the internal causal processes are emphasized in relation to the broader social structural conditions that provoke it. In this way, it provides both a micro and a macro analysis of voluntary risk-taking.

A synthesis of the theories of Marx (1976) and Mead (1964), edgework recognizes human activities that are "spontaneous" and "constrained" as both are necessary dimensions of the unified self. The requirement for free action is social structures in which people can realize their full human capacities, in relation to the products of their labour - a post-Marxist slant includes action free of discrimination based on class, gender, race/ethnicity, culture, sexual orientation, age, or ability (Miller & Lyng, 1991). Spontaneous, creative, impulsive, unique or unpredictable action is given special significance as the locus of the true self or authentic self that human beings are said to seek (Lyng, 1990).

In the absence of the ideal conditions, in a society that is "oversocialized," like our own, people are highly constrained by social structures over which they feel they have little control. Individuals adopt social roles and patterns of behaviour that they had no part in creating, do not understand or critically examine, but take for granted. In this sense, social life seems "unreal."

According to Lyng (1990), to reaffirm their sense of a unified self, individuals create opportunities for free and spontaneous action. In edgework, individuals feel a sense of "direct personal authorship" of actions that reflect their immediate desires and goals. The greater the social constraints upon the individual, the greater the need to reaffirm oneself through spontaneous action. Lyng's macro analysis helps determine what form the edgework activity might take[10], while the microanalysis explains the drive towards the activity.

First hand accounts of edgework experiences include the following key features. Edgeworker's experience: feelings of self-actualization, exhilaration and empowerment; a spontaneous, anarchic, intensely authentic quality; a sense of being in possession of specifically developed "survival skills" in the given context; focused attention, forced concentration, and a heightened sense of control; feelings of suspense and unpredictability; a quality of ineffability that is addictive. Edgework explains voluntary risk-taking as a search for the extreme pleasure in risk, with a denial of the real danger inherent in it.

Similarly, phenomenological accounts by criminals indicate that the greatest motivation for criminal acts is in the criminal experience itself, not in the rewards offered by the crime (Katz, 1988). Edgework provides a way of understanding some criminal behaviour[11], and other high risk activities "that incorporate understandings of humor and pleasure, excitement and desire, entertainment and emotion, and the entanglement of these human experiences in and around the sensuality of the human body" (Ferrell, 1995b, p. 2). Edgework's seductive appeal might also help to explain youths' engagement in risky behaviour.

In reviewing the work of Lyng (1990), Katz (1988) and others, O'Malley and Mugford (1994) conclude:

> Within modern cultures there is a steady and increasing pressure toward emotionally exciting activities, including leisure activities, as a source of transcendence and authenticity with which to offset the suffocation and an over controlled alienated existence within the mundane reality of modern life (p. 206).

Youth Resistance as Edgework

I apply the concept of edgework to the behaviour of youth deemed "at-risk" to look for a way to understand youth behaviour, particularly resistant or risky youth behaviour, that does not view youth as deficient in relation to mainstream society, or as victims of oppressive social structural forces or social psychological processes over which they have little control[12]. I seek to acknowledge youths' agency in and possible enjoyment of their risky activities. I do not suggest that all risky youth behaviour can or should be seen as edgework, but employ the edgework frame to explore alternative ways of understanding youth experiences.

By introducing the possibility of youths' enjoyment of their risky or resistant behaviour into the discussion of youth deemed "at-risk," I do not suggest that all such behaviour is either resistant or enjoyable. While I retain grave concern for the real insidious trauma (Brown, 1991) experienced by youth in our society - those who live in poverty, suffer overt and/or systemic discrimination based on gender, class, race/ethnicity/culture, or ability, or experience other distressing conditions that place them "at-risk," I do question how such oppressive conditions might contribute to risk-taking behaviour.

By looking at youth behaviour as edgework, I do not want to suggest that edgework is the definitive way of viewing youth behaviour, but hope it might add to the discourse, uncover other dimensions and draw out the complexities of the experiences of youth. Social constraints experienced by a young person might include personal limitations, restrictions imposed by the family, limitations determined by family circumstances, the pressure to fit in with peers, an authoritative and restrictive school environment, pressure to do well at school, negative social relations based on gender, class, race, ethnicity or culture. Living the role of adolescent in an adult centred society might be a source of constraint for youth. As the feeling of constraint is a subjective experience one can only speculate as to how youth perceive their reality. Perceived constraints could be experienced as more or less constraining by youth in different contexts. This may explain the difficulty in predicting what particular circumstances lead to engagement in resistant or risky behaviour by any individual. This is why a White middle-class youth, relatively successful at school, might drop out.

By emphasizing enjoyment, while retaining a sense of resistance, edgework avoids the ultimate despair of Marxist interpretations of resistance. Edgework's macro/micro analysis explains both self-reported reasons (boredom, family problems, dislike of school) and social structural reasons (low socioeconomic status, minority racial/ethnic status) for youth to drop out of school or engage in risky or illicit behaviour.

If school is boring (Education, Culture & Tourism Division Statistics Canada, 1991) and crime is fun (Katz, 1988), is it any wonder that young people turn to acts of delinquency, resistance and nonconformity in schools and in the community. Schools and other mainstream social institutions, however, do not leave much room for this type of enjoyment. In any case, the behaviour in question would not be fun if it were not illicit.

Criminologist Ferrell[13] (1995) looked at the activities of a group of urban "hip hop" graffiti writers in terms of edgework, as subcultural activity in opposition to legal, political power and social control. While authorities regarded graffiti writing as vandalism, Ferrell saw it as "the dance of authority and resistance" (p. 82). The youth used graffiti to "resist the increasing segregation and control of urban environments and . . . undermine the efforts of the legal and political authorities to control them" (p. 73). They were consciously responding to the fractured existence in the city that destroyed public space and a sense of community. Graffiti writing reclaimed public space and "beautified" oppressive symbols of the system.

As well as considerable skill and commitment, Ferrell (1995) notes the pleasure available to the writers, which drew them to writing. Their experience was defined by "incandescent excitement, the adrenalin rush, that result[ed] from creating their art in a dangerous and illegal environment . . . heightened legal and police pressure therefore heighten[ed] this adrenalin rush" (p. 82). In the words of one ex-tagger "'I miss the rush. It's a rush because you're taking a chance of getting caught. You do it to see if you can get away with it. It's like an addiction – you can't stop'" (MacDuff & Valenzuela cited in Ferrell, 1995, p. 82). These young graffiti writers used the social and political pressure against them for their personal and collective pleasure.

In particular, "tagging," the writing of subcultural nicknames, asserted a sense of authorship and self-actualization, in a process of shaping identity and gaining status in social organizations newly created by the writers. It also provided young graffiti writers with means of communication, avenues of information, engagement in local politics and social issues, a sense of community, and even possibilities for economic survival when designs were admired by passersby. Ferrell concludes, "moments of youthful resistance – too often dismissed as mindlessly destructive – in fact merit our attention not only for undermining contemporary social arrangements but for imagining new ones as well" (p. 87).

Likewise, the realization of Willis's (1977) working-class "lads" that school would not guarantee them economic advancement turned the boys to delinquent activities that gave them subcultural satisfaction. They could "have a laff" at the expense of school authority through intimidation, fighting and thieving. "Getting away with it" or "bragging their way out of it" if they were caught, added to the excitement and satisfaction of the venture.

Deyhle's (1998) Navajo youth too expressed their resistance by taking part in the subcultural activity breakdancing, later turning to heavy metal music as a form of protest, which came to be seen as a sign of nonconformity and rebellion, thereby earning them fringe status. After the school banned heavy metal T-shirts the youth wore theirs under their other clothes, mocking the dominance of the mainstream culture.

In light of edgework, youth behaviour can be seen as testing the boundaries between the order and authority of the family, school, community, legal system and/or social relations, and the relative spontaneous, anarchic quality of their subcultural activities. The enjoyment and sense of self-actualization they gain from their activities, overrides any sense of risk. The sense of control that youth attain, despite social constraints, satisfies an urgent need in their lives. There is even potential in resistant youth behaviour to undermine existing social arrangements and create new ones in the lives of youth (Ferrell, 1995).

Conclusion

In the field of education, there is a need to further explore the potential of youth resistance to schooling and youths' subcultural activities, including their risky or illicit behaviour, as a means of empowering youth towards achieving their potential. The notion of "border crossings" (Giroux, 1992), as a challenge to repressive social structures and master discourses, may be a way for educators to begin to encounter the "otherness" of youths' resistant behaviour, towards developing a discourse of possibility and envisioning schools as true "cultural frontiers" (Giroux, 1992). To do this there is a need to re-frame the concept of "at-risk" to include the perceptions of youth themselves (Roman, 1996). Whether resistant youth behaviour ultimately proves detrimental to the lives of youth, whether it presents a risk or not, has as much to do with how society views youth behaviour as the behaviour itself.

Notes

[1] Tidwell and Garret (1994) point out that the label "at-risk" is applied in educational, medical, mental health, social services and legal contexts to talk about a wide range of individuals including students who are developmentally delayed, teenage mothers, adolescents with personality disorders, gang members, youth who suffer from depression, college dropouts and even premature infants.

[2] Bessant, Hil and Watts (2003) refer to Ulrich Beck's (1992) *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, which attempts to describe our globalized, capitalist, postindustrial, postmodern society in which mechanisms of the market rather than traditional ties such as family, determine patterns and rules of social life. The term "risk" in this context refers to the anxiety over increased risks in society (ecological, economic, health, security) for which no one accepts responsibility.

[3] The Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed "at-risk" (CRESPAR) was established in the mid 1990's, organized as a partnership of Johns Hopkins University and Howard University, and supported by the National Institute on the Education of At-Risk Students (At-Risk Institute), located within the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) at the U.S. Department of Education. CRESPAR also publishes a journal entitled Journal of Education for Students Placed "at-risk". Also, Mary Stone Hanley (2001) uses the term "put at-risk" to talk about the African American adolescents with whom she works.

[4] In the field of child psychology, learned helplessness occurs when an individual has an external rather than internal locus of control. The learned helplessness paradigm suggests that when individuals feel powerless to control aspects of their lives they become passive and have difficulty coping (Seligman cited in Luthar, 1991).

[5] Post-Marxist adaptations of Marxist theory allow that human agency, in the form of resistance, can challenge the capitalist hegemony. Post-Marxists also admit that schools have some autonomy in making critical thinking, democratic processes and liberatory education possible, and can counteract their roles in reproducing social inequalities through multicultural, anti-racist, feminist and post-colonial studies (Apple, 1995; Fine, 1986; Giroux, 1992). Resistance theory will be discussed in the following section of this paper.

[6] A psychological definition of resistance, which may also be useful here, suggests that resistance occurs in the interaction between individual and the social context when one is asked to do something she/he feels they cannot do on the basis of developmental, cognitive, verbal, affective or introspective grounds (McHolland, 1985).

[7] Critical theorists do acknowledge that not all resistant behaviour has radical significance (Giroux, 1992).

[8] The term "edgework" comes from Thompson's novel about experimentation with drugs. Thompson, H. (1971). *Fear and loathing in Las Vegas: A savage journey to the heart of the American dream.* New York: Warner.

[9] Stephen Lyng's social-psychological theory of edgework was first applied to skydiving (Lyng & Snow, 1986), and later to other extreme sports such as rock climbing, motorcycle and car racing; the sometimes legal, but more often illegal sport of BASE jumping which involves parachuting from bridges, buildings, antennas and cliffs (Ferrell, Milovanovic and Lyng, 2001); other illegal/criminal activities such as graffiti writing (Ferrell, 1995) and "stick up" (Lyng, 1993); also to experimentation with alcohol and drugs; high risk occupations like firefighting, police work and test-piloting (Lyng, 1993); and even to risky research practices investigating edgework activities (Lyng, 1998). It has also been linked to adolescent risk-taking. Lyng's (1993) article looking at criminal behaviour as edgework is published in a book on adolescent risk taking within the context of criminology.

[10] For example, Lyng (1990, 1993) suggests that while a White middle-class male might take up skydiving, having the resources to do so, a lower class minority male might be more likely to turn to gang involvement.

[11] Similar to Lyng's approach, Milovanovic (1997, also co-author with Lyng in Ferrell, Milovanovic, & Lyng, 2001) draws on Lacanian psychoanalysis and chaos theory, to call for an understanding of criminal behaviour that looks at both the background factors determining the motivation behind criminal activity, including the social structural factors, in historical, political and economic contexts, and the foreground factors, the interpsychic forces at work.

[12] A correlation between "at-risk" behaviour and criminal behaviour has been indicated (Hawkins, 1996; Juvenile Justice Comprehensive Strategy Task Force, 2000; Tanner, Hartnagel & Krahn, 1995). In fact, some youth behaviour within the school context is illegal: truancy under the age of 16, vandalism, drug and alcohol use on school grounds, bringing weapons to school; other resistant student behaviour, such as skipping classes, is regarded as "illicit" within the context of school culture. While edgework has also been applied to criminal behaviour (Lyng, 1993), by describing the behaviour of youth deemed "at-risk" as edgework, I in no way want to depict them as criminals. Nor do I want to depict them as heroes or daredevils.

[13] Ferrell is also coauthor with Lyng (Ferrell, Milovanovic and Lyng, 2001) on a study of BASE jumping as edgework.

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. . . Informed by the theory in Paper 3, heavily clothed in my interpretation of course, Paper 4, Reframing At-risk: Popular Theatre Elicits Youth Perceptions of their Risky Behaviour, voices most explicitly what students in my study had to say about their life experiences, including experiences that may deem them "at-risk." The Popular Theatre work we did together took us on an exploration of issues students identified as relevant. My exploration continued through a process involving script writing and discourse analysis. What the students had to say helped me see youth behaviour differently . . .

Paper 4: Reframing At-risk: Popular Theatre Elicits Youth Perceptions of their Risky Behaviour

Introduction

Concern over the numbers of students in our schools deemed "at-risk," high drop-out rates leading to unemployment, "deviant" youth subculture and increased crime have generated a "moral panic" over the safety and economic security of our society. The mainstream discourse around "at-risk," though, constructs youth as deficient and deviant without considering the lived experiences of youth themselves and their perceptions of their behaviour.

My interest in "at-risk" youth or risky youth behaviour grows out of my experiences as a youth, which might too have been deemed "at-risk," and my subsequent work with youth in various educational contexts - inner-city schools, Aboriginal communities, a youth drop-in facility and a young offender centre. On several occasions I noted youths' denunciation of the label "at-risk" as demeaning and paternalistic. There is a need to reframe the concept to include the perceptions of youth about their behaviour deemed "at-risk" (Roman, 1996). For educators, a better understanding of youth perspectives will allow more effective attention to their needs.

This study used Popular Theatre as a participatory, performative research method with a group of youth in a rural Alberta, community of mostly Aboriginal population. Tragically, in Alberta, Aboriginal youth are amongst those most often labelled "at-risk" (Alberta Learning, 2001; Statistics Canada, 1991; Tanner, Hartnagel & Krahn, 1995). Through an improvised dramatic process, I engaged the youth in critically examining their lived experiences and issues they identified as relevant to their lives. The process of re-presenting and questioning their understandings through drama, provided insight into their perceptions of risk-taking and risky behaviour.

Theoretical Framework

The label "at-risk" is applied to youth in education to identify those at risk of or who have already failed, dropped out, and are unemployed/able (Tanner, Hartnagel & Krahn, 1995; Tidwell & Garrett, 1994); in health care to monitor behaviour related medical problems, injury or death (Gascoigne & Kerr, 1996; Grunbaum, et al., 2000); and in criminal justice to youth who are in trouble with the law or engaged in criminal activity (Hawkins, 1996; Juvenile Justice Comprehensive Strategy Task Force, 2000). While this study focused on the educational context, I sought to better understand risky youth behaviour in a broad sense.

Mainstream discourse on "at-risk," based on a deficit model or a "blame the victim" stance (National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1985), identifies risk factors or causes for youth's "negative" behaviour, emphasizing ways that youth need to change to fit existing social/institutional structures. Research on youth behaviour focuses on what adults perceive as negative consequences without considering what youth perceive as the positive outcomes of certain behaviour, or the negative outcomes of not participating (Anderson, et al., 1993; Lopes, 1993). Accounts of participants' experiences of their risky behaviour (Ferrell, 1995; Katz, 1988; Lyng, 1990[1]), often highlight feelings of self-actualization, connectedness, control and excitement that reflects their immediate desires and goals in response to social constraints, or as O'Malley and Mugford (1994) put it, "to offset the suffocation of an over controlled, alienated existence within the mundane reality of modern life" (p. 206).

By introducing the possibility of youth's enjoyment of their "at-risk" or risky behaviour, I do not suggest that such behaviour is purely enjoyable. I do not disregard the dangers/disadvantages inherent in risky behaviour or the systemic conditions that put youth "at-risk." Rather, I want to uncover other dimensions and draw out the complexities of youth experiences as a way for educators and others to begin to encounter the "**Other**ness" of youths' risky behaviour, towards developing a discourse of possibility (Giroux, 1992).

Methods

To explore youths' perceptions of their behaviour, I engaged a group of high school drama students in a series of Popular Theatre workshops. I used Popular Theatre, a community-based theatre process, as a qualitative research method drawing on traditions in participatory research (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Freire, 1988; Park, et al., 1993) and performance ethnography (Conquergood, 1992; Fabian, 1990; Turner, 1986). Popular Theatre as it is practiced, most often in adult education and community development contexts, is theatre for individual and social change involving members of a community in identifying issues of concern, analyzing conditions and causes, and searching for solutions (Boal, 1979/1974; Cohen-Cruz, & Schutzman, 1994; Kidd, 1984; Prentki & Selman, 2000). It draws on participants' experiences to collectively create theatre and engage in discussion of issues through theatrical means as a rehearsal for future action.

In the Popular Theatre project with students, which we entitled *"Life in the Sticks,"* we told stories and created scenes about issues students identified as relevant. The devising process involved in-depth discussion of students' points-of-views regarding the issues under examination. We performed our scenes for students at their school and at a school in a neighbouring town. Using Forum Theatre techniques (Boal 1979/74), we engaged audiences in further discussion of issues and searched for solutions or alternative responses to the "problems" presented. The Popular Theatre work provided insight into youth experiences.

Following the work with students, I wrote a series of scripted descriptions or ethnodramatic vignettes (Denzin, 1997; Saldaña, 1999) to depict salient moments in order to discuss them. Based on audio and videotapes, my journals and field notes and student journals, I acknowledge that the scripts are nevertheless constructions, but self-consciously so (Banks & Banks, 1998). The scripting involved a level of interpretation of what occurred from my perspective as researcher, a measure of artistic licence and editing for practical purposes.

In this paper, I use excerpts from my scripts as a basis for discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992) drawing on critical, postmodern and psychoanalytic theories. In previous work with youth (Conrad, 2001), I noted that critical pedagogy is under the illusion that once oppression is exposed it can be resisted, but this promotes a detached awareness that does not necessarily lead to a change in behaviour (Finke, 1997). Something more is need to transform the way we live in the world. Accordingly, I believe that to educate today's youth for such transformation, we need a postmodern approach to critical pedagogy (Giroux, 1994) that allows for multiple views, possibilities and differences that reflect students' lives and a psychoanalytic dimension which interacts with youths' "desiring identities" (McWilliam, 1997).

Like the interpretation of uncensored discourse in the psychoanalytic "talking cure," I engage with the dialogue that emerged from our improvised drama as instances of performative speech acts (Austin, 1962), whose meanings and intentions exceed the words themselves.

While Popular Theatre and participatory research privilege the voices and meanings of participants, psychoanalysis seeks to uncover what is what is repressed. The two approaches share the goal of personal empowerment and social justice (Bracher, 2002). Like the analyst, The "Joker[2]" in Boal's (1979/74) *Theatre of the Oppressed*, as facilitator of the drama, is in a position to draw out and help participants question their understandings. My psychoanalytic interpretation of students' responses, in the role of "Joker," points out the conflictual contradictions in students' conversation, not to undermine their meanings, but to uncover other possible meanings. I recognize that it is not always one's **conscious** perceptions at the level of the **Imaginary** that construct one's reality, but also one's **fantasies** and **repressions** (Bowie, 1991). I draw on Lacanian psychoanalysis[3] in search of a pedagogy that engages students' identities and **desires** to help them understand the nature and origin of their identity components, work through intrapsychic conflicts and take responsibility for their desires, at the heart of true empowerment and agency.

The interpretations I offer below are not intended as definitive. I want to leave room for alternative readings and multiple interpretations and acknowledge the impossibility of ever fully understanding (Caputo, 1997).

Discussion

Bad-Ass

On our first day together, in way of introduction, I told the students about my prior work experiences. As our dramatic process would ask them to share their experiences with the group, I felt ethically compelled to share some of my experiences too (Fine, 2000). While I carefully avoided labelling the youth with whom I had worked as "at-risk," and had not intended on talking about my experiences as a youth, one student's forthright response to my account aptly drew out what I was not saying:

(Teacher and students are sitting in a circle on the drama room floor.)

Teacher: . . . Let me tell you a bit about myself . . . During my teaching practice I did some work at an inner-city high school and at a youth drop-in center in Ottawa. Then I taught for a few years in the Northwest Territories - in Rae-Edzo, near Yellowknife, for one year, and in a place way up north, called Fort Good Hope, for two years. They were both Native communities. I moved to Edmonton about a year ago and since I've been back at university I've done some work with kids at an alternative inner-city high school in Edmonton and at a young offender centre . . .

Shadzz: So you wanna work with bad-asses?

Teacher: Well, that's not necessarily the term I'd use . . . Why, are you guys bad-asses?

Dancer: No.

Henry: *(bragging)* Ya, we're bad.

(Laughter around the room.)

Teacher: I guess I was a bit of a bad-ass when I was young too.

Frootloop: How bad?

Teacher: Well *(anxiously)* . . . it's all relative I guess. I'm sure bad back then wasn't quite the same as it is now . . . but bad enough . . . Anyway, as I was saying . . .

As much as I have come to expect the unexpected in working with youth, Shadzz's term "bad-ass," caught me by surprise. It straightaway spoke to my interest in "at-risk." Implied by the term "bad-ass" to refer to those other youth was the suggestion that I had come to their school also expecting to find "bad-asses." The question "Are you guys bad-asses?" was my attempt to confront the issue. Students' contradictory replies were revealing. While some immediately rejected the label, others embraced it. Henry's bragging admission to being "bad" and students' subsequent laughter revealed their **jouissance** in identifying with him.

Research on youth subculture, "delinquent" behaviour, criminal activity and gang membership (Deyhle, 1998; Ferrell, 1995; Fine, 1986; Katz, 1988; Lyng, 1993; Willis, 1977) report similar "negative" identifiers. A group of "juvenile delinquents" (Finder, 2000), adopted the mantra "we gotta be worse," when the label was applied to them. They re-appropriated the category "juvenile delinquent" to provide themselves a sense of identity and belonging that was lacking in their lives. Their resistant behaviour could be seen as a struggle to maintain this identity.

The self-identifying label "bad-ass" or the mantra "we gotta be worse" are appropriations of "at-risk" or "juvenile delinquent," with a significant difference. Unlike the labels given to them by the authorities, representatives of the **Symbolic order,** for the students, the term "bad-ass," contained humour. "Bad" in conjunction with the indiscrete bodily reference "ass," has connotations of defiant "shitting" and getting in "shit." The laughter that erupted at the use of the term, in the classroom context, provides insight into the students' jouissance. As an enunciated speech act (Austin, 1962), "bad-ass" represented their Imaginary **gaze**, how they wanted to be perceived, in defiance to the gaze of the Symbolic order - how authority sees them or would like them to be. In the discourse of "at-risk" and "juvenile delinquent," humour is absent.

In response to students' laughter, I admitted to having been a "bad-ass" in my youth. This gave me the opportunity to show empathy with what it might mean to be a "bad-ass," in a sense positioning myself as (ex-)co-conspirator, and making it okay to be a "bad-ass," at least from the perspective of the work we would be doing. However, when asked to provide details regarding how "bad" I had been, I anxiously skirted the question. Here, I was caught in a struggle for identification between the Imaginary and Symbolic, caught in a conflict of authority. My fear of losing teacher/authority status stopped me from revealing too much. While I wanted to be open to hearing what students had to say and to share in their stories, I had to maintain a distance. This was the students' chance to tell their story. Ultimately, as Popular Theatre facilitator and teacher I could not avoid the power or responsibility that came with the roles. In my Imaginary I wanted to be "one of them" so as to reach them, but the authority of the Symbolic prevented me from fully occupying that space. My self-identification as "bad-ass" had to be repressed. My struggle with power/authority in juggling the conflicting roles of teacher/facilitator/researcher was an ongoing source of tension hinging on the search for the right distance from, or space in relation to students, that I could comfortably occupy.

At the time, as researcher, I was also uncomfortable at the thought of disclosing details of my risky experiences as a youth, constrained by the Symbolic order in the guise of academic expectations. Since then, I have come to realize that my personal knowledge is vital to my research endeavour. I have used autoethnographic stories and a collection of artifacts from my youth to enrich my understanding of risky youth behaviour.

The moment depicted above, the beginning of our process, established a tone for our ongoing work. I was glad the issue "bad-ass" or "at-risk" was raised, at least to some extent, on students' terms.

Life in the Sticks

For our Popular Theatre project students were to determine what our work would be about. Moreover, I wanted issues or themes to emerge from our activities and discussion rather than just being decided upon. I was interested in investigating the concept "at-risk" or risky youth behaviour, but as Popular Theatre facilitator, I strove not to impose this as a theme for our exploration. Based on my prior experience with youth, however, I was confident that the issues we explored would address my interest. The following scripted excerpt shows how our title *"Life in the Sticks"* emerged.

(Following a series of warm-up activities, students and Teacher are sitting in a circle on the drama room floor.)

Smokey: So what's our play going to be about?

Teacher: Well, I don't know that. That's something we're going to have to figure out together.

Crack: We should do it about drugs and alcohol.

Teacher: At the end of last class, if you remember, and for those who weren't here . . . we talked about some issues that you thought you might like to explore . . . drug and alcohol use came up . . .

Flower: Let's do it about teen violence.

Teacher: That's certainly a very topical issue with those recent school shootings . . .

Dancer: What about teen pregnancy.

Horse: Or STDs & AIDS.

Shadzz: Unemployment.

Smokey: Criminal activity.

Sophia: Abuse, depression, suicide.

Teacher: Right . . . right . . . There are lots of issues that we could work on, but it's not something that we have to decide right away. We don't necessarily have to decide on an issue at all. Let's just see what comes out of our discussion. Think about how the issues you've mentioned are relevant to your lives. Let's do something that is meaningful to you.

Shadzz: These are issues in our lives.

Teacher: Is there one issue in particular . . . or what is it about all these issues that is relevant? How do they connect?

Flower: It's just the kind of things that go on out here.

Horse: Kids are getting into all kinds of trouble.

Tess: It's because we've got nothing better to do, that's why.

Smokey: Ya.

Tess: Kids get into trouble because they are bored.

Joker: Especially in a place like this . . . this hick town . . . There's nothing to do.

Teacher: So . . . risky sex, violence, drugs, suicide . . . that's all about being bored?

Joker: Damn right. *(Sounds of agreement around the room.)*

Teacher: Is it about the place then? . . . Living in a rural community? . . . Small town life? . . . Life in a hick town?

Horse: Life in the Sticks.

Teacher: "Life in the Sticks." Hmmm. Thanks Horse. Is something we can work with?

"Life in the Sticks," explored these students' experiences of living in a rural community. The title was particularly apt to describe the stands of small trees scattered across the landscape. As a metaphor, "the Sticks" implied a sense of poverty or **lack** in their lives that they blamed for the issues they faced. They said that youth in the community resorted to "problem" behaviour out of boredom. As our work progressed, delving into specific examples of risky behaviour, they were willing to concede that more than the environment and boredom were at the root of their "problems." Our drama work helped them re-examine some of their taken-for-granted beliefs.

An issue that recurred in our scenes was substance use. Research suggests that substance abuse among today's youth is a problem (Bauman & Ennett, 1996; Hawkins, 1996; Howe & Strauss, 2000; Mainous, et al., 1996; Tanner, Hartnagel & Krahn, 1995). One study found that "a feeling state of unfulfilled needs may propel adolescents into the destructive behaviour of substance use. A state of high wants and needs that cannot be gratified simply in a complex society may be a precursor" (Mainous, et al., 1996, p. 807). "A feeling state of unfulfilled needs," they found, co-related but was not identical to depression previously linked to substance use. Through substance use, the study concluded, youth seek to allay unmet needs that cause anxiety, restlessness and a general dissatisfaction with life. Elsewhere, substance use was found to serve a "calming" purpose for today's youth under pressure in our "accelerated culture" (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Rather than problem behaviour, perhaps substance "abuse" can best be seen as a form of self-medication.

In light of Canada's School Leavers Survey report that boredom was the number one reason respondents gave for leaving school early (Education Culture & Tourism Division Statistics Canada, 1991), Tess's statement, "Kids get into all kinds of trouble because they are bored," takes on significance. What is it in the lives of youth that is lacking, that accounts for this boredom? Clearly, "boredom" is an issue for youth, not just for the students in the rural community with whom I worked.

In one scene that students created entitled *"I'm Bored,"* Jezebel's friends tried to entice her into doing something with them. Although she claimed to be bored, Jezebel rejected all her friends' suggestions choosing to do nothing rather than subject herself to activities she deemed redundant (watching the same movie again), unpleasant (walking in the freezing cold) or too risky (going to the lounge underage). None of the alternatives engaged her desire for something to do. The activities that did interest her, such as going to the lounge, were not allowed. Speculating on what might have captured Jezebel's interest, I wonder if it is our postmodern consumer/producer culture, within which youths' ideals of what is worth doing are formed, that leaves them lacking? Perhaps the "feeling state of unfulfilled needs," is what youth are calling "boredom." Does "boredom," listlessness or lack of interest characterize youths' struggle for identity in contexts where their desires or fantasies are not engaged (jagodzinski, in press)? Whatever the root cause of their "boredom," there is a need to help youth become sensitive to their own feeling states in order to minimize any detrimental influence (also Mainous, et al., 1996).

The Bus Trip

The following excerpts are from "The Bus Trip," a scene we devised based on a story told by students. The bus trip incident, which had occurred the previous year on the way home from a school trip, was familiar to most of the students in the class. Many had been on the bus and several were among those caught for drinking alcohol on the bus. In the animation process depicted here, members of the class took on roles and improvised the incident on the bus – alcohol poured into a bottle of Coke and passed clandestinely around the back of the bus. Through various dramatic techniques, we explore the issues raised by the scene:

I'm Cool

(The students and Mr. D., the drama teacher playing himself, have improvised the bus trip incident.)

Teacher: Okay, let's hear what is going on inside each character's head – their inner monologue. I'm going to come around and touch you on the shoulder. When I do, I'd like you to speak as if you were the character. Just say what you're thinking. *(Teacher touches Mr. D.'s shoulder.)*

Mr. D.: Man my butt hurts. *(Everyone laughs.)*

Mr. D.: It's true . . . the bus seats were so uncomfortable.

Teacher: Did you know that anything was going on here?

Mr. D.: Not a clue.

Teacher: Let's hear from the bus driver. *(Teacher touches Smokey's shoulder.)*

Smokey: What are those kids up to?

Teacher: So you're aware of something. *(Teacher goes around and touches each student's shoulder in turn.)*

Joker: Meow, meow, meow, meow . . . meow, meow, meow, meow . . . *(Laughter around the room.)*

Teacher: Thanks, Joker . . . Carlos?

Carlos: *(Teacher touches Carlos on the shoulder.)* This trip is so long and boring. I want to play my music.

Daryl: *(Teacher touches Daryl's shoulder.)* . . . I don't know . . .

Teacher: What is your character thinking?

Daryl: I don't know . . . go to someone else.

Lady: *(Teacher touches Lady's shoulder.)* They're gonna get in so much crap.

Teacher: So you don't think they're gonna get away with it.

Carlos: She's probably gonna tell.

Daryl: Or the bus driver.

Stix: *(Teacher touches Stix on the shoulder.)* Ummmm! She's thinking that she's got to pee. *(Everyone laughs.)*

Teacher: Speak as if you were the character. Say, "I've got to pee." *(More laughter.)*

(Teacher goes around and touches others' shoulders in turn.)

Flower: *(Sitting right behind Mr. D.)* How did I get stuck up here? I want to be back where the action is.

Tess: Shadzz is the coolest. I want another drink.

Shadzz: *(With a big smile.)* I'm cool. I'm the man. They're all drinking my booze.

While "true" stories from participants' lives are already interpretations of what really happened based on the storyteller's selective memories, repressions and preconscious contradictions, investigating these interpretations makes the work immediately relevant and meaningful to participants. In our work on the bus trip scene students could refer directly to what they had experienced and/or heard about. They admitted to knowing that drinking on a school bus trip was "against the rules." They acknowledged the risk involved in the illicit activity and an awareness of the serious consequences of being caught – suspension or expulsion. The incident was a good example of voluntary risk taking.

Shadzz, playing the character who initiated the activity, implied through his inner dialogue that the motivation for his behaviour was about status amongst his peers: "I'm cool. I'm the man. They're all drinking my booze." Earlier he had stated his conviction that he would get away with it, displaying a characteristic of Lyng's (1990) edgework. Edgeworkers believe they possess the specially developed skills needed to survive the risk-taking ordeal. Even later, when his character sat outside the principal's office waiting to be interrogated, he was confident: "No problem. It's cool. They don't know anything." Shadzz's friend Daryl also believed the risk was worth taking.

If motivated by the desire for status amongst his peers, even being caught might add to his popular appeal amongst those for whom outlaw behaviour was admirable, thereby gathering further obedience to his will. As Tess said, "Shadzz is the coolest." Shadzz and Daryl's confidence in taking the risk exemplifies Žižek's "obscene supplement" (1994) to the **Law**. They believed they understood how the Law operates and could break it to their advantage.

Peer Pressure

Teacher: Let's try a flashback scene to the time they actually bought the booze. So, you're on the bus . . . You haven't got the booze yet. The bus is going to stop at the rest stop. Everyone gets off and then we'll take a look at a scene between Shadzz and Daryl when they're deciding what to do. Okay? . . . *(They continue improvising.)*

Mr. D.: Rest stop . . . everyone off the bus . . . everyone off. *(They all file off the bus and stand around. Carlos is playing his CD player.)*

Teacher: *(interrupting)* Shadzz and Daryl . . . do the scene up front here where we can all see . . .

(Shadzz and Daryl move to the front of the stage area.)

Shadzz: *(to Daryl in character)* So give me some money, man.

Daryl: What for?

Shadzz: I'm gonna get the stuff.

Daryl: Na, forget it.

Shadzz: Come'on man you said back there that you wanted to.

Daryl: . . . I don't know . . .

Shadzz: Come'on, it's just around the corner.

Daryl: Na . . .

Shadzz: Nobody's gonna know.

Daryl: Okay, here. *(Daryl gives Shadzz some money.)*

Teacher: Okay stop there for a minute. Daryl, I want to ask your character a question . . . I noticed that you hesitated. Why did you hesitate?

Daryl: I don't want to drink. *(Students all laugh – Teacher is told that this is funny because it is out of character for Daryl the actor.)*

Teacher: Remember, this isn't Daryl talking, he's playing a character, right?

Daryl: *(Continuing in character.)* I can't afford to get into any more trouble.

Teacher: So, what made you give him the money?

Daryl: He's my friend. I want to be cool like this guy.

Teacher: What is your definition of cool? I'm asking anybody now. What does it mean to be cool?

Tess: Like cold! *(Students laugh.)*

Shadzz: To fit in with the crowd.

Teacher: Is this scene about peer pressure? Does Daryl have to go along with the cool guy in order to be accepted?

Lady: I don't know if it's peer pressure, but if he wants to be friends with Shadzz, he's gotta do it.

Teacher: Is that peer pressure?

Flower: Not peer pressure. He doesn't have to do it. It's more like peer influence.

Teacher: So there's a difference between peer pressure and peer influence?

Flower: Ya.

The distinction that Flower makes between peer pressure and peer influence is affirmed in research on peer relations. A study of mental health determinants for high-risk behaviour found the notion of "peer pressure," from the perspective of adolescents, to be a myth (Ungar, 2000). Based on their accounts, the term "peer pressure," used by adults to explain youth misconduct, implies coersion, which youth claimed did not exist. Rather, they chose to associate with a peer group with which they identified. Adoption of the behaviour of their peers was a deliberate strategy used to exercise power in the construction and maintenance of individual and collective identities. This type of peer association was regarded as health-promoting by avoiding a sense of alienation, even if the identities formed were "delinquent."

Other research (Bauman & Ennett, 1996; Michell & West, 1996) also found the negative influence of peer group on individuals' behaviour to be exaggerated, suggesting instead a causal relationship opposite to that implied by "peer pressure." Individual choice rather than peer pressure influenced teens' behaviour, where individuals chose their peer group based on common behaviours or attitudes. Personal agency in youth misconduct has often been ignored.

In our work, students also rejected the notion of peer pressure in favour of "peer influence." "Influence" over "pressure" already allows room for "choice," a notion that students articulated explicitly in a later discussion. Here, Daryl's character initially claims he "does not want to drink." He briefly considers the consequences of being caught: "I can't afford to get into any more trouble," recognizing the potentially negative consequences of the act, but chooses to go along with Shadzz to maintain his friendship and accompanying status in association with the "cool guy," in order to "fit in with the crowd." Lady's comment: "If he wants to be friends with Shadzz, he's gotta do it," implies the positive outcomes of participating in the behaviour and the negative consequences of not participating (Lopes, 1993).

From a critical perspective, youth's denial of the existence of "peer pressure" in their identity construction and behaviour, in favour of a claim to personal agency through choice is an empowering step. A psychoanalytic interpretation of the move from "pressure" to "choice," however looks beyond individuals' claims to truth to seek out what is being repressed. In this case, the notion of "pressure" is clearly repressed. The kind of deliberate strategies youth claim to employ through choosing to associate with a peer group based on shared behaviours and attitudes are strategies employed at the level of the Imaginary in defence of the ego, to maintain a secure identity. While ego consolidation is necessary, psychoanalysis searches out the source of authentic agency beyond the Imaginary, at the level of the fundamental fantasies that structure the sense of self and relationships with others.

Daryl's choice to go along with Shadzz, is a choice between buying the booze, a minor transgression, or losing his friendship with Shadzz and the accompanying status as an identity marker. At the level of the ego, it is an impossible choice, really no choice at all – Daryl is compelled to defend his sense of self, his identity in relation to Shadzz (as a bad-ass). The alternative would involve a significant change to his identity. The pressure for Daryl to conform is illustrated in a "**slip**," when the utterance of the character he is playing, "I don't want to drink," elicits ironic laughter from the class as his words reflect on his "real life."

Though students **resist** the idea of pressure, pressure is evident. Though not explicit or coercive, it is implied by the context. There is group pressure to identify with Shadzz's proposed behaviour at risk of exclusion. It is the gaze of the group that defines Daryl's loss of association with Shadzz, as a negative outcome for non-participation. That the notion "pressure" is collectively repressed adds to the group's cohesion, allowing each one to participate in the behaviour for their own self-rationalizing reasons.

Rather than ask whether youths' risky behaviour is due to pressure (external coercion) or choice (agency) as both are at play, psychoanalysis would seek out youths' fantasies or desires to understand their motivation: What is it that makes them want to drink alcohol on the bus? What is it about the bus trip that is is lacking, that compels them to seek out the ***objet a*** in the lure of alcohol? Speculating on answers to these questions returns me to the notion of boredom. What is absent from the context of the bus trip is students' jouissance. They are on their way back to the "Sticks" from a class trip. They were in fact returning from a day in the city, the theatre, presumably a place more exciting than the "Sticks." Perhaps the city had served as *"object of desire"* whose attainment left them lacking. On their way back to "the Sticks," perhaps the alcohol provided an escape from the shared anti-climax of the return trip.

For the Rush

(The animation process continues.)

Teacher: So Daryl, is there risk involved in what you're doing here?

Daryl: Ya.

Teacher: What kind of risk?

Daryl: Well, what we're doing is against the rules.

Teacher: Whose rules?

Daryl: The school rules I guess.

Teacher: And where's the risk in that?

Daryl: Well, we might get caught.

Shadzz: And expelled.

Teacher: You admit there may be negative consequences . . . so why do you do it?

Daryl: I don't know.

Teacher: Shadzz, what about your character?

Shadzz thinks.

Shadzz: I don't know, just for the rush I guess.

Teacher: For the rush? Is that what risk-taking about? That's why someone might drink booze on a bus trip?

Shadzz: Ya, it's fun.

Teacher: *(Addressing other students on stage and in the audience.)* Have any of you experienced what Shadzz is talking about? Does doing something risky give you a rush?

Tess: Well, YA! *(Echoes of agreement around the room.)*

In explaining the motivation behind his participation in the risky activity, Shadzz's term "rush," was identical to that used by edgeworkers (Ferrell, Milovanovic, & Lyng, 2001; Katz, 1988; Lyng, 1990; Lyng & Snow, 1986). In phenomenological accounts by criminals (Katz, 1988), the greatest motivation for criminal acts was in the criminal experience, not in the rewards offered by the crime. The experiences of the young graffiti writers' (Ferrell, 1995) were defined by "incandescent excitement, the adrenalin rush, that result[ed] from creating their art in a dangerous and illegal environment" (p. 82). First hand accounts provide a way of understanding participation in high-risk activities that incorporates "humour and pleasure, excitement and desire, entertainment and emotion, and the entanglement of these human experiences in and around the sensuality of the human body" (Ferrell, 1995, p. 2). Shadzz's term "rush" suggests the seductive appeal of youth's engagement in risky behaviour – their jouissance.

A psychoanalytic interpretation of the self-destructive quality of risky behaviour adds further insight. The "rush" experience embodies the excess of pleasure of Lacan's "jouissance" (Bowie, 1991), so "at-risk" or risky behaviour can be seen as the jouissance of the student's body. Psychoanalysis suggests that the tendency in the **unconscious** struggle between the life drive and the **death drive** is for the subject to "recoil before the violence and obscenity of the **superego**'s incitement to jouissance, to a boundless and aggressive enjoyment" (Copjec, 1994, p. 92). Is youth behaviour an indication that in our postmodern culture, with the loss of authority of the Symbolic Law, youth are less inclined to resist the call of the superego? (jagodzinski, in press) Is their "feeling state of unfulfilled needs" (Mainous, et al., 1996) or "boredom," a will-to-jouissance?

Rats

Teacher: Let's try another scene. This time we're going to go into the future . . . when the students are confronted by the school principal . . . Let's set up the principal's office here and then a few chairs here for students to sit while they wait to be called into the office . . . *(Students help Teacher set the stage.)*

Teacher: Thanks . . . So, everyone who was on the bus come and take a seat here . . . It's the day after the bus trip. You've all been called down to the office. Let's hear your inner monologue now.

(Teacher goes around and touches characters on the shoulder one by one.)

Daryl: Shit! Now I'm in big trouble. My parents are going to kill me.

Joker: What's going on? I didn't do anything.

Tess: I only took one drink.

Shadzz: No problem. It's cool. They don't know anything.

Lady: I hope they don't find out I told.

Teacher: So you did tell on them. Why did you do that?

Lady: I was mad at Tess.

Teacher: Is that why people tell . . . for revenge?

Carlos: And to look good in front of the teachers.

Teacher: So how do you feel about informers?

Shadzz: Informers? . . . They're rats!

Lady: They suck!

Teacher: And what would you do if you found out that someone had informed?

Shadzz: Beat them up, or if it's a girl, you get a girl to beat them up.

Teacher: Does beating them up solve anything?

Daryl: Yes, it stops them from doing it again.

Teacher: Okay. Put yourself in the shoes of the school administration for a second. Do you think there is a need for rules like: No drinking on the bus?

Tess: Yes.

Shadzz: But rules are made to be broken . . . you have to break the rules once in a while.

Teacher: From the perspective of the administration is there a need for informers . . . to help enforce the rules?

Daryl: Let them worry about their own rules . . . if they didn't find out we were drinking . . .

Lady: We do need rules . . . drinking on the bus isn't good, but neither is informing.

The problem of peer informants or "rats" as Shadzz calls them, took our discussion to the heart of student resistance to schooling via rule breaking and the ultimate consequence of rule breaking, getting expelled or pushed out of school. Yet, there is truth to Shadzz's statement that "rules are made to be broken . . . " The transgression of public laws is inherent to their functioning as there must be an element that stands outside any system to sustain it (Žižek, 1994). Rule breaking, then, is part of the "obscene underside" or "obscene supplement" of the Law. Informing, is a perverse discourse caught between the law and its underside, with the informer doing the dirty work of the Law.

Exemplifying traditional acts of resistance against forces of domination (Scott, 1990), the ethos amongst workers is for any who "curry the favour of the bosses" to be called names (ass-kisser, bootlicker), glared at, shunned or beaten (p. 26). This dynamic is echoed in Carlos's suggestion that students tell, "to look good in front of the teachers," and the disdain students expressed for peer informants. Lady said, "they suck." Shadzz called them "rats." Negative terms such as "rat" (also tattle tale, snitch, squealer, sell out, stool pigeon) suggest informants' abject status. The informer or "rat," represents behaviour of members of their community at its worst.

In naming others, students also name themselves (Butler, 1997). By using the term "rat," they identify the school authority as a dominating force and identify themselves as members of a subordinated community at odds with the Law that governs them ("bad-asses"), which they perceive as unjust. In such instances of unequal power relations, the norms of behaviour generated amongst the subordinate group are often their only countervailing power to their behaviour as determined from above (Scott, 1990). For subcultures outside the Law, informing is condemned.

The act of "informing," contested by students, is inconsistently practiced in society. From wartime patriotism, to organized crime, informing on one's group is frowned upon if not treasonous. In parenting, the distinction is made between "tattling" to get attention and "telling" in order to prevent harm. In law enforcement, informants are exploited yet despised – sought out and compensated for their dirty work as a necessary evil, on the assumption that Laws are meant to protect us. Thus in programs such as Crime Stoppers, and in schools, informing is rewarded as a sign of good citizenship. The guidelines that apply to informing involve loyalty to one's group, identified as the "good guys" and prevention of harm.

Loyalty to one group, however, implies disloyalty to another and in any act of informing someone is harmed. Harm done to the "Other" – the "bad guys," criminals or the enemy, I suggest, is still harm. There is also harm done to our social well-being through the practice of "Othering" – the "Othering" that informing promotes. Practices of the Law, such as informing, construct binaries of "good" and "evil" that do not adequately address the complex interactions of social beings. Thus, ambiguities around the notions of Law and justice emerge.

Here I draw on postmodern theories (Derrida, 1992; Litowitz, 1997; Lyotard, 1984) where law is a system of rules that are constructed, based on an arbitrary set of customs, and backed by the authority of the system, which the law serves. While laws attempt to be just, justice is beyond the law, exceeding the law, and at times contradicting the law. Justice is a multiplicity of "justices" based on an ethical relation with the "Other," and the imperative to do the right thing, which involves respect for the incalculable and unpredictable alterity of the Other (Zylinska, 2001). While justice can never fully be accomplished, it must be attempted with the awareness that injustice can result from the practice of Law, from the clash of two conflicting systems of justice (Lyotard, 1988).

In this light, students' perceptions of "informing" command attention. The informer, played by Lady, was a member of the peer group who, by informing, was disloyal. Her act of informing was an act of betrayal, making her deserving of being "beaten up." Yet, from the perspective of school authorities she would have been commended for her loyalty to the school, its rules, and her peers. The informer's motivation, however, was not based on loyalty or prevention harm, but on revenge against Tess, at whom she was mad. Was Lady's anger due to jealousy over Tess's alliance with Shadzz? In any case, her informing was a performative speech act intended to harm (Butler, 1997) and perverse in that Lady used the Law to prop up her anger. The act of informing, promoted an injustice, which the school context permitted in the name of upholding the rules.

Daryl's comment, "Let them worry about their own rules . . . if they didn't find out we were drinking . . ." raised a good question. What harm would likely have come from drinking on the bus trip had the student not informed? Even the supervising teacher admitted that he was oblivious to the illicit behaviour. Has a rule been violated if the Other of the law is uninformed (Žižek, 1994)? Daryl's statement exposed the arbitrariness of some rules and questioned their purpose. Considering the dire consequences of Shadzz's act – his expulsion from school, did catching and punishing the culprits really serve the greater good?

Like the students, I acknowledge the need for rules to maintain social cohesion. I value public safety and looking out for one another, but I question the need to uphold the rules at any cost. I understand the assistance to law enforcement and school authorities that informing provides, but in blind obedience to the law, no justice is served. Informing is a practice that needs to be interrogated. While I do not condone students' solution of "beating up" informers, what other power do they have to assert their sense of justice?

Lady concluded, "drinking on the bus isn't good, but neither is informing." Her statement revealed the complexity of the situation suggesting the need to take time to unravel the subtleties of behaviour within the school context, in order to promote ethical treatment and justice for all. For Noddings (1999) and Sevenhuijsen (1998), justice is based on an ethics of care; untempered with care, a search for justice can lead to injustice. In Zylinska's (2001) ethics of the feminine sublime, rather than judging on the basis of a system of rules we should search for the rule that may do justice to the case – a search which is endless.

Expelled

(In the improvisation Shadzz has admitted to buying the booze and has been expelled.)

Teacher: Let's finish up with just one more scene . . . Shadzz you've just found out that you've been expelled. Sit down here on the front of the stage and just talk to yourself for a few minutes about how you're feeling now . . . Everyone else just come here into the audience and have a seat.

Shadzz: (Shadzz sits on the front of the stage.) What a bummer . . . now what am I supposed to do . . . so much for school . . . and I was almost finished too. My parents are going to kill me. I'll have to go out and find a job at A & W or something . . .

Teacher: Thanks Shadzz . . . So let me ask you . . . Do you think the risk was worth taking?

Shaddzz: No.

The incident described in *"The Bus Trip,"* exemplified the process of being pushed out of school when students do not conform to its rules. Shadzz's character indicated his awareness of the dire consequences of being expelled - conflict with parents and limited employment opportunities. From this new perspective, he reconsidered the risk concluding that it was not worth taking. However, to whose gaze was Shadzz's monologue addressed? Did he really learn a hard lesson based on the consequences of his action, or was he merely saying what he believed the school context expected him to say? Given his identity as "bad-ass," expulsion may have given him further inducement to transgress or greater status in the eyes of his peers. In reality, I was told later, the expelled student found work at a local fast food outlet and then applied for upgrading at a community college. Our fictive improvisations helped us explore the implications of the situation beyond what really happened.

A Matter of Choice

Towards the end of our process, several students agreed to an informal audio-taped interview. I hoped to sum up what students were already saying through theatrical means regarding their perceptions of the behaviour we were exploring.

(Teacher and students are huddled around a microphone on the drama room floor.)

Teacher: "Life in the Sticks!" What's it all about?

Flower: What do you mean?

Teacher: Look at the scenes we created. They are about rule breaking, risky behaviour, alcohol use, addiction, boredom . . .

Shadzz: Ya . . .

Flower: We live in the sticks . . . we have nothing else to do.

Teacher: Think about the characters in those scenes . . . Does living in the sticks make them who they are?

Flower: It's about their habits.

Teacher: And where do these habits come from?

Daryl: Bad people. Bad habits come from bad people. *(Everyone laughs.)*

Teacher: Do you really think you're bad people Daryl?

Daryl: Just kidding. *(More laughter.)*

Teacher: What's this play about?

Daryl: It's about life in the sticks.

Flower: It's about what teenagers do down here . . . same old, same old.

Shadzz: Problem life. Problems people have.

Teacher: Where do the problems come from?

Flower: Just wanting to be with your friends and going along with what they do.

Daryl: Wanting to be cool.

Flower: Not because you want to be cool, because you don't want to be left out – and not just because you want to follow. Just because you want to.

Lucky: But then if everybody just wants to belong . . . I drink because so-and-so drinks. He drinks because . . . why don't you just quit . . . you drink because it's your own choice. It's not to fit in. I don't drink because I want to be cool with you guys. I drink with my parents. I drink alone . . .

Flower: You drink just because you want to and do anything else because you want to.

Daryl: But it also depends on how you want to drink. You can drink to get drunk. You can drink just to have a few . . .

Teacher: So is it true to say that where you live only has so much influence on a person?

Lucky: But life in the sticks is a choice. You choose to live here.

Daryl: Why did you come here?

Teacher: Well . . . because I'm interested . . . the label that's often used is "at-risk" . . . I'm interested in working with "at-risk" students. I really don't like the label, but it's something that I'm exploring in my work . . . Students that maybe don't have all the advantages that middle-class kids might have - kids that are outside the mainstream of society or disadvantaged in one way or another - inner-city students, kids who are poor, teenage moms, living on their own going to school, kids in a rural community, minority kids, Native kids often fit into that category too . . . So how do you respond to that label "at-risk" youth?

Shadzz: We're not disadvantaged.

Daryl: Ya, we have a peaceful place, clean air and we can shoot ducks, bear, moose . . .

Lucky: We can go fishing.

Flower: What's mainstream?

Teacher: Mainstream . . . you know, like the majority of people in Canada . . .

Flower: You mean like white?

Teacher: White and middleclass.

Lucky: There's lots of people here who are middle-class.

Flower: "At-risk" makes us sound like we're a bunch of alcoholics, drug addicts and bums or something.

Elizabeth: It seems that . . . like we're judged because we're Native.

Daryl: That's the stereotype of Native.

Shadzz: We're judged by where we live.

Teacher: That's interesting, Flower like what you're saying . . .The label makes you sound like you're alcoholics and drug addicts. You're resisting that label . . . but in Life in the Sticks you're saying that those are problems. So, how does that go together?

Flower: It just doesn't make sense . . . That's what "at-risk" sounds like, what you're saying. But in the scenes it's not as if we're total alkys hard up for drinks all the time and drug addicts. It's just what we do over here. It's not as if it's a problem, eh?

Elizabeth: For some people it's a problem.

Flower: Ya for some people, but not for everybody.

Elizabeth: Some can handle it.

Flower: That label makes us sound like everybody here is at-risk. But, it's not like that.

In response to my query "What's this play about?" Flower's response, "We live in the sticks . . . we have nothing else to do," reiterated our original premise for *"Life in the Sticks."* My question, "Does living in the sticks make them who they are?" was a test of their conviction in that belief.

Daryl's comment, "Bad habits come from bad people," again brought the self-identifier "bad" into play. (Daryl was not present in class for our first conversation about "bad-ass.") Once again "bad" caused students laughter/jouissance to erupt. In contrast, the phrase "bad people" made me cringe – I wondered if this corresponded to the "Native stereotype" Daryl referred to later in the conversation. My response, "Do you really think you're bad people?" unfortunately shut down the conversation. Daryl's, "just kidding" elicited another round of laughter (the last laugh), but ultimately served to repress the notion "bad." Perhaps "bad behaviour" is precisely the repressed trait that holds this community of youth together. If I had been more sensitive as a psychoanalytically informed Joker/facilitator I might have pursued the notion "bad" to uncover students' jouissance in relation to this term – to uncover the conflict implied by "bad" between how the students see themselves and how the gaze of the social order positions them as youth, "at-risk," and/or Aboriginal.

Students' identities as Aboriginal, and issues of race and social class were seriously raised for the first time in this discussion of "at-risk." Elizabeth's statement, "It seems that we're judged because we're Native;" Daryl's reference to the "stereotype of Native;" and Shadzz's statement, "We're judged by where we live;" indicate an awareness of the gaze of the social order that identifies them as Aboriginal and/or residents of a rural Aboriginal community, yet this did not come up as an issue in our scenes. Whether Aboriginal identity and racism did not arise in relation to the issues we explored due to a sense of social cohesion in their majority Aboriginal community, or were effectively silenced by the majority (though well-meaning) Caucasian teachers at the school (me included) was a concern. Upon reflection, I see that the question of race was, to a large extent, repressed in our work and in this paper.

In this discussion, our search for understanding took us again through peer pressure to the notion of "choice." Flower's, "just because you want to" and Lucky's "because it's your own choice," in the context of our work, articulated a new perspective on what this kind of youth behaviour was all about. For the students, the idea of "choice" was a reversal of their original notion that their problems were due to the boredom they felt, having nothing to do in their small community. Choice gave them a sense of agency in and responsibility for their own behaviour. From a critical perspective, the move from seeing oneself as a victim of one's environment, to claiming agency is empowering. A psychoanalytic interpretation would take a closer look to see what is repressed in students' conversation.

Choice, though potentially empowering, is negotiated on a conscious level, entailing a process of self-rationalization or ego defence to keep one's identity intact. Students' resistance to the notions "peer pressure," "at-risk," and "disadvantaged," (particularly in relation to their identities as Native) - their rejection of the stereotype of youth as "bums," "alkys" and "drug addicts," left them struggling, individually and as a group, to negotiate the conflicted terrain that emerged when the notion of social "problems" was set up against their identities (as "bad-asses"). The conversation gave rise to moments where their defences falterd, interpretation began to fail and their anxieties emerged - as in Flower's response, "It just doesn't make sense . . ." and Daryl's attempt to turn the questioning back on me, "Why did you come here?" The need to cover these anxieties brought us closest to revealing the students' fundamental fantasies that form the core of their subjectivities.

Daryl and Lucky's romanticization of the landscape, "we have a peaceful place, clean air and we can shoot ducks, bear, moose," and "We can go fishing," was in direct contrast to the boredom of "Life in the Sticks" expressed earlier. Here they seem to be repressing one interpretation of their environment, "boring," against the other, "peaceful," to negotiate their shifting subject positions in relation to the labels "bad" versus "at-risk" and "disadvantaged." While the pleasant aspects of "Life in the Sticks" (peaceful, clean air, wildlife) did come up in our initial brainstorming, the students clearly did have a positive connection to the land, they did not offer these during the creation of our scenes and subsequent work, which focused on "problems."

Again, in their final analysis the repressed conflict emerged. The notion of social problems facing youth in their community was repressed in favour of the illusion of choice. Flower suggested, "It's just what we do over here. It's not as if it's a problem, eh?" to which Elizabeth responded, "For some people it's a problem." The suggestion that "some can handle it" (them), while for some it is a problem (others), suggested an ego defence - "everything is okay" suppressing the very fact that "everything is not okay." Perhaps the claim that it was all a matter of choice precisely covered the fact that the students felt they had no choice or power over their lives, their desire being the desire for the very choice and agency in their lives that they claimed to have.

Finally, Flower's statement, "The label makes us sound like everybody here is at-risk. But, it's not like that," highlights, the fact that what was still conspicuously absent from the discourse of "at-risk," here as elsewhere, was youths' jouissance, the enjoyment of their risky behaviour. Perhaps risk-taking and the enjoyment they gained from it provided the opportunity for youth to feel that they did have some choice – self-created opportunities for spontaneous, authentic action.

Conclusion

Students in a neighbouring town (majority Caucasian/middleclass) for whom we performed our scenes told us that they lived "In the Sticks" too, and faced the very same issues. Our improvised drama process opened a space for conversation to occur amongst the students and helped them re-examine some of the issues they raised. Their claim that their risky behaviour was motivated by choice rather than a response to their "boring" environment gave them a greater sense of agency. Yet, the real empowering potential of the work, helping students gain insight into why they make the choices they do, was limited by my ability in the role of Joker/facilitator to draw out, and the students' willingness or capacity to interrogate the **fantasy** structures that shape their realities. The key might have been to further investigate the students' *jouissance* in their self-identification as "bad-asses" or "outlaws," their relationship to authority and their ambiguous relationship to their environment regarding their feelings of "boredom" versus their enjoyment of the land possibly tied to their identities as Aboriginal. In this way I might have interacted with their "desiring identities" (McWilliam, 1997). Nevertheless, by asking youth to articulate and question their experiences through an embodied, spontaneous, intuitive, and affective dramatic process, this study contributes to the process of rethinking youths' risky behaviour and the term "at-risk" to include the perspectives of youth. Research that allows youth to voice their perceptions has the potential to shift the conversation regarding youth deemed "at risk." Acknowledging youths' perceptions of their experiences may influence how educators and policy makers perceive youth, leading to more appropriate responses to their needs.

As educators, we need to consider behaviours such as dropping out, substance abuse, risky sex and violence not as problems to be solved, but as symptoms of larger issues in the lives of youth that encourage their risky behaviour, issues that are not adequately addressed in the current discourse on youth. Furthermore, these symptoms are not specific to youth behaviour, but endemic of society, suggesting social structural factors that encourage risk taking. As Ferrell (1995) suggests, in his study of young urban graffiti writers, we also need to consider the potential in youth behaviour to undermine existing social arrangements, and create new ones in the lives of youth. Then, whether or not youth behaviour ultimately proves detrimental to their lives has as much to do with how society views their behaviour as the behaviour itself. Exploring the potential of youth behaviour, including their subcultural activities, illicit or risky behaviour, and even their resistance to schooling, may be a means towards greater justice.

Notes

[1] Lyng's (1990) Edgework, a social-psycholocial theory of voluntary risk-taking highlights participants' own experiences of risk-taking activities. Edgework has been applied to instances of skydiving (Lyng & Snow, 1986), motorcycle racing, BASE jumping - involving illegally parachuting from bridges, buildings, antennas (Ferrell, Milovanovic & Lyng, 2001); also to criminal activity (see Katz, 1988) and adolescent risk taking (Ferrell, 1995; Lyng, 1993).

[2] Boal's (1979/1974) "Joker" is the facilitator of the Theatre of the Oppressed process. The Joker works with participants in the roles of questioner, devil's advocate, wild card or trickster.

[3] Lacanian psychoanalytic terms are **bolded** the first time they are used throughout the text and defined in the glossary included with this paper. Definitions are based on Evans (1996).

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Glossary of Psychoanalytic Terms

The following definitions are summarized from Evans (1996).

consciousness – Consciousness is part of the human psyche which via the ego produces the illusion of fully transparent perception.

death drive – Lacan follows Freud's notion of the death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Seen in fundamental opposition to the life drives, which tend toward cohesions and unity, the death drive tends towards destruction. Lacan situates the death drive in the symbolic order, as a repetitious pursuit of its own extinction, an attempt to go to the realm of excess jouissance where enjoyment is experienced as suffering.

defense – The reaction of the ego to interior stimuli which it perceives as dangerous.

desire – Unconscious (sexual) desire is central to Lacan's psychoanalysis. The aim of psychoanalytic treatment is to lead one to recognize the truth about one's desire, to name one's desire, but desire can never be fully articulated in speech. Desire is what is left over after needs articulated in demand have been satisfied. Desire is a relation to lack, the desire for recognition from the Other that is continually deferred.

ego – The ego is a construction formed by identification with the mirror image. It is the place where the subject becomes alienated from her/himself. Lacan is opposed to ego-psychology, which aims to strengthen the ego as this only increases the subject's alienation.

fantasy – Fantasy is a scene which is presented to the imagination, which stages an unconscious desire. Fantasy serves a protective function, enabling the subject to sustain her/his desire and protect oneself against the lack in the Other. There is always one fundamental fantasy that constitutes the subject. Psychoanalytic treatment attempts to modify the fundamental fantasy as a mode of defence.

gaze – The eye which looks is that of the subject, but the gaze is on the side of the object. The gaze (as opposed to the look) is the object of the act of looking. It is the gaze of the Other. When the subject looks at the object, the object is already gazing back, but from a point, which the subject cannot see. The gaze refers to how we see others seeing us.

identity – The ego and superego are constructed on the basis of a series of identifications. The subject's identity is constituted through imaginary identification - recognizing oneself in an image or images and appropriating the image(s) as oneself, and symbolic identification – identification with the signifier.

The end of analysis occurs when the subject's identifications are placed under question so they can no longer be maintained in the same way.

Imaginary – The imaginary order is one of the three orders (Symbolic, Imaginary, Real) at the centre of Lacanian thought. The basis of the imaginary order is the formation of the ego through identification with the mirror image. The imaginary is associated with image, illusion, deception and lure. The principal illusion is one of wholeness and autonomy. It is the order of surface appearance, observable phenomenon which hide underlying structures.

jouissance – The French word jouissance means "enjoyment" with added sexual connotation. Jouissance describes the paradoxical satisfaction the subject derives from her/his symptom or the suffering derived from one's own satisfaction. The pleasure principal is the inner law, which commands one to limit one's enjoyment, but the subject always tries to transgress these prohibitions. As there is only so much pleasure the subject can bear, the pleasure becomes a painful pleasure. Jouissance is fundamentally transgressive.

lack – Lack is the subject's lack of the object which causes desire to arise.

Law – Law refers to the fundamental principles, which underlie all social relations. It is a linguistic entity of the Symbolic order. Desire is the reverse of the law. Law imposes limits on desire, but gives rise to desire through prohibition. Desire is the desire to transgress the law.

life drive – The life drive (eros) is the tendency towards unity and cohesion in opposition to the self-destructive death drive.

object a – Object a is the object of desire which we seek in the other (a refers to "autre" or other). It can never be obtained, so is really the cause of desire.

Other – The little other is not really an other but a projection of the ego. The big Other is radical otherness, which cannot be assimilated through identification. The big Other is inscribed in the symbolic – in fact it is the symbolic order. Another subject may embody the Other for the subject.

repression – The process by which certain thoughts or memories are expelled from consciousness into the unconscious. The repressed material is always liable to return in distorted forms such as symptoms, slips, dreams, jokes.

resistance – Resistance is the unwillingness to recall repressions or say everything that comes to mind. It is structural in nature based on the incompatibility between desire and speech and can never be overcome. Though it interrupts the progress of treatment, psychoanalysis values the subject's resistance as it opposes suggestion. Resistance suggests that the patient cannot go any faster. The source of resistance is in the ego.

slip – A subjects repressed material is always liable to return in distorted forms such as through slips of the tongue – unintentional or ironic utterances.

superego – The superego is located in the symbolic order. Paradoxically associated with the Law, the superego both commands the subject to enjoy via the will of the Other, and it limits the will-to-enjoy through judgement and censorship. The superego is at the same time the law and its destruction - obscene, tyrannical and oppressive.

Symbolic –The symbolic order is essentially linguistic, the symbolic dimension of language being the signifier. The symbolic order emerged as a human function autonomous from biology. The symbolic order is the most crucial for psychoanalysis regarding the effects of signification/speech on the nature of human beings. The unconscious belongs to the realm of the symbolic. Psychoanalysis must work in the symbolic to produce changes in the subject position of the analysand. Psychoanalysis is the talking cure.

unconscious – The unconscious is the determination of the subject by the symbolic order. It is radically separated from the consciousness through repression and cannot enter the conscious without distortion. It is an unknown knowledge.

. . . Amidst the polyphony of living and researching risky youth behaviour with this particular group of students in their drama class, life tossed me an uncanny little encounter, one that was too serendipitous to be planned for, too opportune to be random. Paper 5, When Autobiography and Research Topics Collide: Two Risky School Dance Stories, describes a moment when two risky school dance stories collided in my reality causing a dilemma, which I was unable to solve . . .

Paper 5: When Autobiography and Research Topics Collide: Two Risky School Dance Stories

Introduction

For my research, I engaged a group of high school drama students, in a rural Alberta community of majority Aboriginal[1] population, in doing Popular Theatre as a form of participatory research (Kidd & Byram, 1978; Park, 1993). Popular Theatre is a process by which members of a community identify issues of concern, analyze conditions and causes, and search for solutions or alternative responses (Boal, 1974/79; Prentki & Selman, 2000). It draws on participants' experiences to collectively create theatre and discuss issues through theatrical means. Through the research, I hoped to better understand the experiences of youth that might deem them "at-risk,"[2] from their perspective, and explore the potential of Popular Theatre in doing so. My interest in "at-risk" was based in my prior work with so-called "at-risk" youth, and as this paper will reveal, my own risky experiences as a youth.

Our Popular Theatre work focused on issues that the students identified as relevant to their lives. The theme that emerged through drama activities and discussion was "Life in the Sticks." In a collective process, we created a series of scenes depicting what the students' initially claimed as their issues as determined by their rural environment. The stories students told, the vignettes we created and the animation[3] process became a sort of "ethnodrama" or performance ethnography (Denzin, 1997; Fabian, 1990; Turner & Turner, 1982), revealing risk-taking behaviours, including substance abuse, risky sexual activity and rule breaking, as common to the experiences of these youth. Ultimately, however, the students rejected the notion of being "at-risk," claiming that their risky behaviours were a matter of personal choice and habit. They reclaimed their agency, but left me wondering what motivated their risky choices. My desire as researcher to better understand the motivation behind youths' risky choices, including my own risky behaviour as a youth, is the subject of this paper.

In the following pages, I present two autoethnographic stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Ellis & Bochner, 2000) that involve risky youth behaviour; two school dance stories, which reflect on my research with students. The first describes an incident that occurred at a school dance while I was in the community doing the research. The other story describes a school dance experience from my youth. The two stories juxtaposed show how my autobiographical experiences influence my response to the research.

For ethical, thematic and practical/writerly reasons the stories are fictionalized accounts of what actually took place (Banks & Banks, 1998). I have changed names, dates and less significant details to disguise the events for ethical reasons and to make the stories reader friendly. This also provides me some distance from the actual events in order to reflect on them from a socio-cultural rather than a personal perspective. The stories are intended not as acts of indulgent self-discovery, but as cultural self-readings (Ang, 1994) as I compare and contrast my experiences as a youth with those of others.

In my interpretation of the stories, I use a psychoanalytic lens to examine my experiential/embodied/unconscious process of arriving at understanding. Also, as creative works, I want the stories to speak for themselves to some extent

(Saldaña, 2003). I hope that the reader will make meaning beyond my interpretation – that the stories will resonate with the reader's own experiences.

I use the term "collision" in my title to highlight the real danger inherent in the risky youth behaviour described in the stories.

School Dance Stories

One evening, during my time in the community, on my way to help supervise a school dance, I had an experience that complicated my emerging thoughts about youths' risky behaviour based on our Popular Theatre work, and collided with memories of my own risky experiences as a youth. I wrote the following autoethnographic narrative in response to finding a student's stash under a bush next to the school on the night I was supervising the school dance. The story describes my conflicted response to the find.

School Dance 1999

One Friday evening during my stay in the community, I offered to help supervise the high school dance. Many of the students who were participating in my research would be there. I thought this would be a great chance to get to know them better. I walked along the dirt path between the trailer where I was staying and the school. It was about 7 o'clock and just getting dark. The evening was brisk. I remember putting a sweater on under my favourite faded jean jacket. At least it wasn't too muddy tonight.

As I approached the end of the fence that enclosed the school grounds, I could tell that the dance had already begun. Music and the noise of rowdy voices wafted out from the gym. Several kids in pairs and small groups wandered in and out through the front doors. I walked past the scraggly bush that grew right up against the fence half way to the corner of building, the same bush that I had walked past every day on my way to and from school for the past weeks. I was only partly aware of a dark object tucked under the bush. I walked right by it at first, assuming it was something discarded. I don't know what made me stop and look again at that spot under the bush. There were many discarded objects around - maybe this one didn't seem quite discarded enough, or maybe it was that I'd walked past this bush so many times before and hadn't noticed a discarded black thing. For some reason I was suspicious. I hesitated. Whatever it was, did I really want to go groping around under a bush at this time of night, on my way to the dance? What if someone saw me?

I stepped a little closer and saw that it was a backpack. Now I was really suspicious and curious – memories of school dances from my high school days whispered warnings in my head. Did I really want to know? Did I really want to get involved in whatever that backpack was hiding there under the bush on the night of a school dance? I'm not sure if it was my sense of responsibility (a professional obligation) - my concern for the kids (worst case scenario - What if there was a gun in that bag?) - or just plain voyeuristic curiosity (remembering what I was like back then), that made me check out the bag. I grabbed it from its hiding spot under the bush. As I picked it up, I could hear the clinking of bottles inside. I tugged at the zipper and found a six-pack of raspberry/lemonade coolers and a colourful, skimpy tank top. It belonged to a female, I concluded. I wondered if it was anyone I knew – one of the girls from drama class perhaps. I tried to imagine what the owner had in mind. Was she going to sneak out here with her friends during the dance and pass around the bottles, all giggly at the sheer rebelliousness of the act? Maybe it was for a party after the dance, a little drinking, a boy . . .

Once I knew what was inside, I still wasn't sure what to do with the bag. I questioned my motives. I questioned my questioning of my motives. As an adult, teacher, and authority figure, shouldn't I automatically turn it in? Then why was I hesitating? Whose side was I on? Was this about taking sides? On the one hand, this was just like something I might have done as a high school student. It was a little harmless fun, wasn't it? How drunk could she get on six coolers anyway? I was tempted to return the bag to its spot under the bush and just forget I'd ever seen it. I would have a private, subversive chuckle knowing that someone at the dance was getting away with it. On the other hand, what if I didn't turn in the bag and something terrible happened. What if she got caught with the booze and expelled from school? What if she had an accident drinking and driving on the way home or got into a car with someone who was drinking - something she wouldn't have done if she were sober? What if she got hurt or killed? I would be forever guilty, an adult, a teacher, having had the opportunity to do something, to prevent tragedy, and done nothing.

While I was willing to allow the girl her dissident behaviour, I decided, I would not be able to live with the guilt should anything bad come of it. I left the backpack there, entered the school building and searched for the vice-principal, who I knew was on duty. I told him that I'd found a backpack tucked under a bush outside the school. I told him what was inside. He was very, very interested as I knew he would be. We shared a conspiratorial sort of laugh. Did we get a kick out of outsmarting the culprit? Had we proven our authority/superiority once again by catching them up to their tricks? Or was it the sheer nerve of the kid to try such a stunt that amused us? We walked out through the front doors together, past hordes of students coming and going in the hallway from the coat rack to the pop machines and back to the gym where the dancing was underway. I took him to the spot and showed him the backpack under the bush. He took it inside. He was going to hold on to it, he said, to see if anyone would be foolish enough to claim it, which of course no one ever did. He named a couple of girls he thought might be capable of such a thing. One of them was a girl from my drama group.

I walked back into the school and into the gym. The music was loud, much too loud to carry on any kind of conversation and the lights were dim with spots of colour spinning around the room. There were students huddled in groups around the dance floor dancing or standing up against the wall. As I looked around, I caught occasional glimpses of familiar faces. I couldn't help feel sorry for whoever's bag it was that I had turned in. I felt a twinge of disloyalty to the students who had been so open in sharing stories of their escapades with me during our work together. Just a couple days before we had talked about informers or rats as they called them - how they were viewed with contempt by other students, even beaten up. We had talked about why students told on each other - sometimes for revenge, and how the administration used students by encouraging the behaviour. Now I was the rat. Our conversation had been about students informing on each other. I was a visiting teacher/researcher turning in a student. Was policing part of my job? It was certainly part of my supervisory duties at the dance. In any case, ultimately I had done it to protect them, hadn't I? Still, somehow I felt guilty. I felt implicated.

Several days later, I noticed the six pack of raspberry/lemonade coolers and the black backpack still sitting on the vice-principal's office shelf where he had put them that night. The owner had never claimed her possessions. On top of it all, I felt bad that she, whoever she was, had had to part with the backpack – a useful item, and the beautiful tank top too. Had I done the right thing by turning in that backpack, hadn't I? But it didn't feel entirely right. I wonder if something can be right and not right at the same time.

Ironically, my good intentions of helping out with the dance to get to know students better plunged me into a dilemma. I got to know students better, but not in the way I had expected. Here was an example of exactly the kind of risky youth behaviour my research was interrogating. When my role as teacher/dance supervisor was suddenly brought into conflict with my identity as researcher/Popular Theatre facilitator, I was left grovelling in uncertainty. My responsibility in relation to this act of risky youth behaviour was not at all clear.

That evening as a dance supervisor, I was expected to patrol students' behaviour, to keep them in line, but as researcher, the very behaviour that deemed them out of line, was the terrain of my inquiry. My indecision surrounding the black object under the bush was unsettling - an "ordeal of undecidability," which Derrida (Caputo, 1997) suggests is a possibility sustained by impossibility. In this case, the impossibility of determining where my responsibility lay. I began by questioning my motivation for looking or not looking under the bush. I had a duty to fulfil, but how far was I willing to go to fulfil it. I questioned my motivation as researcher. Was my interest in the backpack out of voyeuristic curiosity about my students' risky behaviour? Or was it sincere concern for the well-being of my students? It was unsettling how, in the moment of decision-making, the research topic erupted the boundaries of the formal research setting, the classroom, and the formal research relationship and collided with my "real" life both past and present. This eruption of the Lacanian Real (Bowie, 1991) disrupted my search for identity, the right distance between teacher/student, researcher-facilitator/participant. Suddenly, my next move, in the real world, was caught up in the illicit behaviour of the student, and thoroughly entangled in my research topic. I felt exposed, implicated.

As my indecision suggests, the process of decision-making was not pre-determined. In the past, my teacher identity would likely not have thought twice about turning in that backpack. Now, though I struggled with my obligations to the institution, my role as dance supervisor. Ultimately I did not take recourse in the Law. Though this no doubt, would be how my turning in the backpack would be perceived.

Caught in the process of weighing the consequences of my next move, my indecision was informed by the work that students and I were doing in the classroom. As part of our Popular Theatre process students had shared a story recounting an incident that had occurred the previous year when some students were caught drinking alcohol on a school bus trip. We acted out and explored the incident and the issues it raised. Inquiring how the administration found out about the drinking, students raised the possibility of peer informing. Despite acknowledging that rules were necessary, they said, "Rats suck." They felt students who informed on other students deserved being beaten up. In our work together students had confided in me regarding their risky behaviour, developing a relationship of mutual trust. Here I was cast as their supervisor/judge. I did not want to inform on them, to become the "rat" who turned in the backpack. My empathy with the students' attitudes helped me see it from their perspective. My research cast doubt on any course of action.

Lyng (1998), reflecting on his participation in the risk-taking activities that he was researching that left him critically injured, introduces the notion of a "hierarchy of consequences," that also apply in this case. From an ethical standpoint, when encountering behaviour that involves potential risk, the researcher needs take the consequences of the action into consideration. At the top of Lyng's hierarchy are actions that unambiguously lead to the harming of others, at the bottom harmless acts of disobedience. As he notes, however, the task of identifying the precise criteria on which to judge one's actions as harmful or harmless is ambiguous. Was drinking at a school dance just "harmless fun," or might something bad have come of it? Ironically, students' earlier self-identification as "bad-asses" and my own admission to having been a "bad-ass" in my youth, collides with my fear as teacher/supervisor that something bad might actually happen. How are we to judge the potential risk of any risky youth behaviour?

My concern for the student was also partly based on my own experiences as a youth. I knew that the six-pack of coolers could indeed lead to further illicit behaviour, even tragedy. The associations I made between drinking at a school dance and the dangers of boys, driving under the influence, and car crashes was grounded in my personal experience, the subject of my accompanying story. Nor is the danger of car accidents an idle concern as they are, nowadays, one of the major causes of injury and death amongst young people. The risk involved was real and for me, the risk implied by the backpack was not worth taking. But who was I to make the decision of whether to take the risk or not? Was I asserting my authority after all? I told myself I turned in the backpack based on my sense of responsibility to the students. My concern was for keeping them out of trouble and keeping them safe from harm. Was I being paternalistic?

My conflicting feelings of guilt, if I were not to turn in the backpack and something bad came of it, and disloyalty to students for "ratting" on them, depict my punishing super-ego (Evans, 1996) at work in my conflicting roles of authoritative adult/teacher/supervisor versus sympathetic Popular Theatre facilitator/researcher. When I turned in the bag to the vice-principal, our conspiratorial laughter revealed our shared *jouissance* (Evans, 1996) - the painful pleasure we experienced in finding the "find," of outsmarting the culprit, perhaps our repressed admiration for the sheer nerve of the student in trying to defy us.

Even our sincere concern for students had its evil underside as we took joy in our demise of their enjoyment.

School Dance 1999 ends with the query: Can something be right and not right at the same time? This is precisely the quest for justice can never be attained, as justice is always a matter of perspective. This was the place where justice and Law fall apart. My compulsion to do the right thing came up against my emerging realization that right and wrong can always only be partial. I was engaged in an endless search for the rule that would do justice to the case (Zylinska, 2001).

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My next story resonates with the previous one - an echo from twenty years earlier. It is a story about an experience I had back in 1979 as a teenager on the way to a high school dance. This was one of the memories that hovered at the back of my mind as I decided what to do with the backpack I found on the night of the school dance in 1999. The two stories, juxtaposed, show how my personal history informed my research into risky youth experiences, and how these in turn inform my response to youth.

School Dance 1979

When I was in high school, in grade 11, back in 1979, I had a boyfriend named Paul. He was one year older than me, played hockey and drove a dark blue Ford Mustang. He was a great boyfriend. Not only did he have a car – which was a status symbol in itself, but it was a fabulous car. It was fast, powerful, and all the others guys at school wished it were theirs. This made Paul ever so popular. And I was always proud to sit in the car next to him.

One Friday night we had plans to go to the school dance. But before the dance, Paul and his friend Dave wanted to visit another friend in a neighbouring town. Each took his own car. I drove with Paul in the Mustang. Dave drove his girlfriend in his car. Paul took the old Highway Number 16 from Stevensville, picked me up in Roseland, and then on to Bartlett, to the friend's house. Old Highway Number 16 is a narrow, two-lane highway winding through scenic fruit growing country. Just before the town of Bartlett, the road dips and winds through a valley where the escarpment meets the road. The road is particularly winding through the valley, cut into the side of the hill. At certain points, the drop beyond the guardrails is straight down. I'd taken that stretch of road a thousand times before, and the trip to Bartlett that evening was as uneventful as usual. The ride back to the dance however would prove more treacherous.

We spent an hour or so at the friend's house. Just enough time for a few beers, a few joints and a few laughs. Then we were headed back to the dance. I must have got plenty intoxicated in that short time. My memory of being there, of the people we met, is fuzzy. I must not have been thinking clearly to get into the car with Paul in his state. He must have been too drunk to realize he couldn't drive.

Dave and his girlfriend drove on ahead and we followed in the Mustang. Driving through the valley, it was already dark. The road was deserted. The headlights reflected off the black tarmac, the solid yellow line down its centre. It was drizzling I think. The road was winding and blurry. I was talking to Paul, but what was I saying? We were moving slowly, or was I just experiencing everything in slow motion? The next thing I knew, as we were climbing the hill to leave the valley, the car swerved across into the oncoming lane – thank goodness there was no traffic, and off the road. On that side of the road, the escarpment went straight up. We must have driven partly up the incline, because then I felt gravity pulling us back down. Paul's side of the car left the ground and began to roll over ever so gently. Inside, in slow motion, I saw the windshield turn in front of me, and I turned with it. I felt the impact as the car rolled onto its side. I reached my arms up to brace myself against the roof as it flipped over, and landed upside-down in the middle of the road. I heard the crunch of metal as the car came to rest on its roof. I wasn't wearing my seat belt. I pushed open my door easily, or was it already open, and crawled out. Within seconds that seemed like an eternity, I was standing on the road looking back at the car, wheels in the air still spinning. I was shaken, shaking, but not a scratch. Paul was still inside. I called to him to get out. Got a muffled reply. I went around to his side of the car. He was okay, but stuck behind the steering wheel, mad as hell that he'd wrecked his car. He managed to squeeze out, also uninjured, except for a bruise on his leg. We had been lucky.

Then other cars started appearing out of nowhere - headlights out of the dark. Cars stopped behind us. Drivers asking if we were okay. They told us we were lucky the car hadn't rolled again, right down the embankment – into the valley. I looked over the edge and felt queasy. Then Dave and his girlfriend were there. And now it was raining. When they noticed we weren't following anymore, Dave said, they'd turned around to look for us. They feared the worst. Dave talked to Paul. Then we could hear the sirens approaching in the distance. Fire engines, ambulances and cop cars converging from both directions with lights flashing. The valley was notorious for accidents, but we didn't need them. All we needed was a tow truck for the car.

Before the cops arrived, Dave and his girlfriend whisked me away with them. They took me by the arms and led to me their car. They said it was no use me being caught on the scene, Paul would deal with the cops. I felt bad for leaving him, but went along to the dance.

Then I was there, at the dance, still shaken up, telling my story to friends and laughing. Nothing like a little danger to liven up the evening. In a half an hour or so, the vice-principal approached me. Then I was scared. He said the police wanted to talk to me, and led me to his office. I worried that the cops would be able to tell I was high, but they didn't say a thing about that. Paul told them that I'd been in the car. I guess there were witnesses that had seen me too - he couldn't deny it. No one knew what had happened to me. The cops looked everywhere. They even started searching for me in the valley. They even called home and now my parents were involved and all upset. The cops told me to call them so I did. I was hoping it wouldn't come to that. The less my parents knew about what I was up to the better. I got on the phone. They were angry, but mostly scared. I managed to calm them down. I wasn't hurt. I was at the dance with my friends. Nothing to worry about.

The cops left me at the dance and that was that. I got off easy I guess. Paul was charged with drinking and driving – not too big an offence in those days. He spent the night in the drunk tank. The worst of it all was that his car was totalled. The roof crumpled in – probably not worth fixing. It sat for a long time like that in Paul's driveway at home. So much for the fabulous car. We were very lucky to have walked away from the accident. Things could have been much worse. If we'd been going any faster, or if Paul had turned the wheel towards the valley side rather than the escarpment side of the road, the outcome may have been disastrous. As it turned out, though I didn't get to go to the school dance with Paul, I did make it to the dance, no worse for the wear.

The two school dance stories read together draw attention to the conflicted subjectivity that I brought to my role as a teacher and researcher exploring the risky experiences of youth, having engaged in risky behaviour myself as a youth. In fact, I have come to see this investigation of "at-risk" or risky youth behaviour as a working through of some of the ambivalences still surrounding my experiences as a youth - the research being as much about me as about the youth with whom I worked. The school dance memory that informed my decision about the backpack exemplifies Freud's notion of *Nachträglichkeit* or "differed action" (Strachey, 1974) – how the affective associations from my past influenced my actions later in life.

The experience I describe in *"School Dance 1979"* is one among many that are the basis for my identification with "at-risk" youth. Like my research participants, my enjoyment in identifying as "bad-ass" is evident in the status I enjoy in association with my boyfriend's fast car, the fun in drinking and drug use, the pleasure I got from telling my elicit story to my friends. The use of the term "cop" as opposed to "police officer," further suggests my position as "bad ass" - outside the law. Yet, it is a painful pleasure offset by the real dangers involved in the incident.

Seen from a distance, the drinking and driving incident and rollover in my youth, brings into perspective the real risk involved in some of my behaviour as a youth and the risky behaviour of youth today. While I understand the desire to want to drink at a school dance, I am also wary of the inherent dangers. In my story, the car literally transformed from being a fantasy object (*objet a*) providing status and enjoyment, into a death trap. The horror at how unexpectedly, how easily this transformation occurred makes the experience uncanny. My speculations regarding the young female student's intentions in 1999, my worst fears for her were based on my having been there. My perspective looking back at my behaviour as a young woman was transferred to my response to finding the backpack. The backpack took on the psychological weight of the abject car and screamed of danger.

The car accident in 1979, though minor, had an impact. To this day, the image of driving off the embankment haunts me. And though the consequences of our risky act were negligible for me, I cannot help but worry now, as I did in

1999, over the potential harm in seemingly harmless acts of fun and question whether the risk is worth taking.

In my moment of indecision my sense of responsibility and horror collided with the empathy I felt for the students' risk-taking behaviour. I understood very well the desire to risk drinking alcohol at the school dance, but feared the potential dangers. The painful pleasure inherent in my decision making process revolved around "the booze" as the object of desire for my students as for myself in my youth. At the same time, it harboured a moment of terror. Caught between the prevention of harm - my students' safety, and the *jouissance* of their/our risky behaviour, I chose to exercise caution. I turned in the backpack at the expense of their enjoyment. Now, I justify my decision by telling myself that as no one was caught for the deed, no one was punished, the potential for harm minimized all around. However, in this dangerous, direct encounter with the alterity of the other (Zylinska, 2001), I had to risk becoming the despised informer.

In retrospect, other alternatives to turning in the backpack come to mind. What if I had kept the bag, taken it home? What if I had enjoyed the coolers myself? How would I be implicated then? Or had I been willing to take the risk, I might have taken the backpack to class to explore the implications of the find with students in relation to risky behaviour, the authority of the school, and my conflicted role. Was this an opportunity for dialogue that I missed? No doubt this new memory will be added to my repertoire and carried into future queries.

Conclusion

The collision of my identity as teacher/researcher with the topic of my research, brought on by the school dance incidents I describe, bringing into focus how my subjectivity was implicated in the research. In search for an ethical response to being caught up in this way, I realize the needed to pay attention to my own history, my risky experiences as a youth, to let them also inform my thinking about youth behaviour. In this way, I make use of my risky youth experiences as a basis for empathetic understanding of and critical reflection on youth issues.

Notes

[1] In planning my research I indicated an interest, based on my personal and professional experience, in working with so-called "at-risk" youth. I did not specifically seek to work with Aboriginal students. Tragically, as I was to learn, whether in the inner-city, the youth justice system or in a rural community, in Alberta, "at-risk" is highly correlated to being Aboriginal (see also Alberta Learning, 2001; Makokis, 2000). My work attempts to problematize the label in relation to all youth.

[2] The label "at-risk," is used in the field of education to talk about students "at-risk" of failing or dropping out of school. In mainstream literature in education, health care and criminal justice, the label depicts youth as deficient or deviant. This research re-frames the label "at-risk" to include the perspectives of youth. It highlights the risky, risk-taking behaviour that youth engage in by choice, the enjoyment they gain from such experiences and its rebellious or resistant quality. In this way, the research advocates on behalf of youth, to dispel the negative image the label "at-risk" portrays.

[3] Animation is a term I borrow from Boal (1979/74) to refer to the process of employing various techniques (Image theatre and Forum theatre) to explore issues raised by a scene through theatrical means.

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. . . Through moments like the one described in Paper 5, somewhere along the way in the process my research, a realization surfaced, one that I could no longer deny. One of the reasons I was interested in working with and researching "at-risk" youth was because of my own risky experiences as a youth. This was the basis for my understanding of and empathy with students deemed "at-risk." Paper 6, Unearthing Personal History: Autoethnography & Artifacts Inform Research on Youth Risk Taking, recounts the unearthing or re-discovery of a collection of artifacts from my youth along with some of the risky stories they elicited. As a researcher, at first I hesitated to tell my risky stories. Even now they still feel almost too risky for the academic context. I dare telling them because I asked my students to tell theirs. Yet, for every risky story I do tell, there are many others that can not be told . . .

Paper 6: Unearthing Personal History: Autoethnography & Artifacts Inform Research on Youth Risk Taking

I begin from the premise that research will always be affected by the subjectivity of the researcher, in the choice of research topic and in the interpretation of findings. My study using Popular Theatre as a participatory, performative approach to exploring the risky experiences of youth was further informed by an autoethnographic investigation into my own experiences as a youth, an unearthing of my personal history through autobiographical writing and a (re)collection of artifacts from my youth. My arts-based methods draw out stories from my past that add a messiness to the research reflecting the complexity of the issues under investigation.

My study began with an interest in better understanding the behaviour of youth that may deem them "at-risk." As a teacher and Popular Theatre facilitator, I had previously worked with so-called "at-risk" youth in various contexts. On more than one occasion, if I happened to mention the label "at-risk," it was firmly indicated by the youth that they found the label offensive. They were no doubt responding to the way the mainstream discourse in education, health care and criminal justice, portray "at-risk" youth as deficient and deviant (Roman, 1996). As Roman suggests, there is a need to reframe "at-risk" to include the perceptions of youth, to help us better understand their experiences and better address their needs.

To explore youth perceptions of their "at-risk," (later re-framed as risky behaviour), I conducted a series of workshops with a group of drama students at a rural Alberta high school of mostly Aboriginal population. Tragically, Aboriginal students in Alberta are amongst those most often labelled "at-risk" of dropping out of school (Alberta Learning 2001). To engage the students in representing and exploring their perceptions of their experiences, I invited them to participate in a Popular Theatre process.

As theatre for individual and social change (Boal, 1979/74; Prentki & Selman, 2000) Popular Theatre involves members of a community in identifying issues of concern, analyzing conditions and causes, and searching for solutions or alternative responses. It draws on participants' experiences to collectively create theatre and engage in discussion of issues through theatrical means. Our Popular Theatre work focused on issues that the students identified as relevant to their lives. We entitled our project "Life in the Sticks." Through a collective process, we created a series of scenes depicting what they initially saw as their issues as determined by their rural environment. The stories students told, the vignettes they created and our ensuing theatrical explorations became a sort of "ethnodrama" (Denzin, 1997), or performance ethnography (Turner & Turner, 1982), revealing risky behaviours, including rule breaking, substance use and risky sexual activity, as common to the experiences of these youth. Ultimately, however, they rejected the notion of being "at-risk," claiming instead that their risky behaviours were a matter of personal choice and habit. They reclaimed their agency, but left me wondering what motivated their risky choices.

One scene that students created, which we called "*The Bus Trip*," was based on an incident that had occurred at the school the previous year, in which many of these students were involved. It depicted a group of students being caught for illicitly drinking alcohol on the bus ride home from a class trip. In devising the scene, students took on roles and improvised the situation. The excerpt below is from one of a series of scripted descriptions I wrote, after the fact, as an arts-based method of re-representing the work with students. It shows a moment we enacted between two young men whose idea it was to buy the alcohol. In the midst or our re-enactment, I stopped the action temporarily, a common Popular Theatre technique, to delve deeper into the motivation underlying their decision:

Teacher: Let's do an out-scene to when they actually bought the booze, okay? Let's start on the bus . . . It's going to stop at the rest stop. Everyone gets off and we'll see the scene between Shadzz and Daryl deciding what to do. Okay?

They set up the scene and improvise. The bus stops at the rest stop and they all get off. Shadzz and Daryl meet on the sidewalk.

Shadzz: *(to Daryl in character)* So give me some money, man.

Daryl: What for?

Shadzz: I'm gonna get the stuff, remember?

Daryl: Na, forget it.

Shadzz: Come'on man you said back there that you wanted to.

Daryl: . . . I don't know . . .

Shadzz: Come'on, it's just around the corner. I'll go get it and bring it back here.

Daryl: Na . . .

Shadzz: What's the matter? Nobody's gonna know.

Daryl: I don't know Shadzz.

Shadzz: Come'on, Daryl.

Daryl: Okay, what the hell . . . Here. *(Daryl gives Shadzz some money.)*

Teacher: Stop there – for a minute. Daryl, I want to ask your character a question . . . You hesitated to give him the money. Why did you hesitate?

Daryl: I don't want to drink. I can't afford to get into any more trouble.

Teacher: So is there risk involved in what you're doing here?

Daryl: Ya.

Teacher: What kind of risk?

Daryl: Well, what we're doing is against the rules.

Teacher: Whose rules?

Daryl: The school rules I guess.

Teacher: And where's the risk in that?

Daryl: Well, we might get caught.

Shadzz: And expelled.

Teacher: You admit there may be negative consequences . . . so why do you do it?

Daryl: I don't know?

Teacher: Shadzz, what about your character? (*Shadzz thinks.)*

Shadzz: I don't know, just for the rush I guess.

Teacher: For the rush? Is that what risk-taking about? That's why someone might drink booze on a bus trip?

Shadzz: Ya, it's fun.

Teacher: *(Addressing other students on stage and in the audience.)* Have any of you experienced what Shadzz is talking about? Does doing something risky give you a rush?

Tess: Well, YA! *(Echoes of agreement around the room.)*

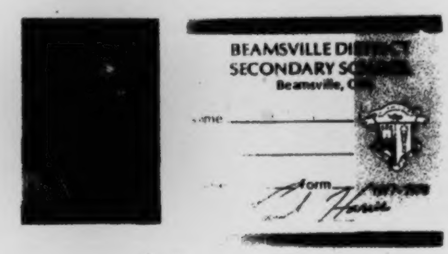
Through the dramatic process of taking on roles, re-enacting the incident and answering questions in character, aspects of students' understandings of the issues were revealed. In Popular Theatre, drama serves as a medium of exploration which allows an experiential, embodied investigation of issues. Shadzz's suggestion that his character took the risk "for the rush," was a response based on his experience of acting out the situation. The Popular Theatre exploration, which had students act out experiences from their collective past, was also autoethnographic. Their memories of the bus trip, re-told as a story and improvised in a scene are living artifacts that help them/us better understand the experiences being investigated.

The students' responses to my questions about risk-taking, as depicted in the excerpt above, piqued my interest. Shadzz's claim of doing it "for the rush" echoed claims by risk-takers in research applying Lyng's theory of "edgework" (Ferrell, 1995; Lyng, 1990; Ferrell, Milovanovic & Lyng, 2001). The social psychological theory of voluntary risk-taking, sees risk-taking as self-created opportunities for free and spontaneous action in response to overwhelming social constraints. I found other compelling research on adolescent risk-taking that suggested rather than focusing on what adults perceive as negative consequences of adolescent behaviour we should consider what youth perceive as the positive outcomes of risky behaviour or the negative outcomes of not participating in risky behaviour (Anderson, et al., 1993; Lopes, 1993).

A psychoanalytic interpretation of self-destructive or risky behaviour suggests an unconscious struggle between the life drive and the death drive - the tendency for the subject to "recoil before the violence and obscenity of the superego's incitement to jouissance, to a boundless and aggressive enjoyment" (Copjec, 1994, p. 92). Is it possible that in our postmodern consumer/producer culture, with the loss of authority of the Law, youth are less inclined to resist the call of the superego (jagodzinski, in press)?

At one point during my interpretive process of the research with students, a realization emerged, or rather I became willing to admit to myself, that my interest in working with "at-risk" youth was grounded in my own risky behaviour as a youth. I could no longer repress the significance my personal history had to my research. This began an autoethnographic inquiry (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) into my youth. The unearthing of my personal history involved a recovery of a collection of artifacts from my past (Slattery, 2001) and the writing/telling of stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) of my youthful risk-taking experiences which resonated with what the students and the theory were revealing.

The unearthing of artifacts actually began before I became consciously aware of where my investigation was leading me. On a trip home to Ontario a few summers earlier, I visited friends, a family with whom I had resided during my grade 12 year, working as their live-in babysitter for room and board. In their dark, dank, farmhouse cellar, I had stored a number of boxes of my stuff. From these boxes, that summer, I recovered a number of items about which I had all but forgotten. Though I was not sure why, at the time, I felt these items, yellowed and smelling of mildew, were somehow significant to my research. I gathered them together and brought them home with me.



Like the artifacts, the unearthing of them, the (re)collection of the items from their resting place in the cellar, and the re-presentation of the unearthing through my telling of it, are part of my arts-based process. My story of unearthing, and the stories of my youth that the artifacts embody, are artifacts too, as are my students' memories/story/scene of the bus trip incident. Stories and storytelling in various forms - through improvised drama, are vital artifacts to this autoethnographic process, as the ways in which I have arrived at new understanding.

The artifacts I unearthed, dated from 1977 to 1980, my last three years of high school. Along with fresh-faced photos of me and my friends, old drama festival programs, my fake I.D. used to get into bars underage and a tattered cheerleading badge, they included: My grade 11 yearbook, the inside covers scrawled with classmates' comments; a research project I completed on parent-youth conflict for my grade 12 sociology class; a small Hallmark date book from 1979, decorated with a bouquet of orange flowers, with the words "Date Book" scratched out and re-titled "Dope Book;" and a one-act play I wrote for my grade 13 playwriting class entitled "*Some Joke*."

WELCOME
TO B.D.S.S.

When I re-read my classmates' comments in my yearbook, I was struck by the way they expose the edge I was playing between being a good student and just "having fun:"

> *"I decided I wouldn't put something ignorant. So I'll just say work hard in physics and get your homework done so you can lend it to me. Love Bob."*

> *"Remember as you go though life keep your eye on the donut not the hole. Good luck in Math (as if you need any). Darlene"*

and then,

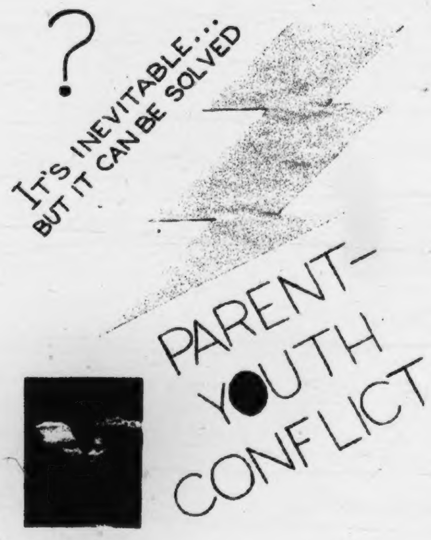
> *"Toke. Toke. Toke. Have fun enjoy life but Toke period 5. Luv Sue"*

> *"Roll roll roll the joint. Pass it down the line. Take a toke. Inhale the smoke. And blow your little mind. Sam & Janice"*

These contradictory comments disrupt any taken-for-granted notions about the "good student" and the "drug user," that may contribute to a re-examination of such labels.

An excerpt from my sociology project, for which I received a 93%, reflects the conflict situation I experienced at home, and my attempt to understand it:

> *Late adolescence is a time of extreme frustration. I can verify this by the experiences of myself and my friends. The pressures upon every teen by parents, close friends as well as peers, school or the labour force and the rest of society are great . . . Often he [sic] cannot talk to his parents because they will not accept his viewpoints and he feels he has no one to encourage him, and therefore he releases his frustrations through aggressive or rebellious behaviour.*



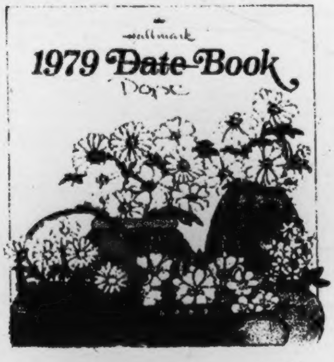
Whether my aim was to understand the motivation behind or find excuses for the rebellious behaviour of my friends and myself, my feelings of teenage angst are exposed.

The "Dope Book's" cryptic scribbles in the squares allotted for each day are incriminating records of illicit events in the lives of my friends and I including the numbers of reefers we smoked each day:

"Wednesday January 3, 1979 - Karen, Alice, Rhoda 3 reefers – 5 more with Brad and Jerry"

"Friday February 23, 1979 - Ellen's all nighter – Karen, Alice, Rhoda – Acid & lotsa reefers."

"Saturday March 10, 1979 – Reefers at Mark's – the gruesome 4some"



Incriminating as it is, I cannot help but wonder what compelled me to keep such a record. Was it a way of assuring myself that my experiences were real? A way of bragging, if only to myself, of my friendships and edgy behaviour? Or a way of capturing that feeling of reckless abandon - the overflow of jouissance?

The play I wrote in grade 13, entitled *Some Joke,* was based on a real incident from my life involving my boyfriend, at the time, Bobby, and his cousin, Suzy. One night during a house party, the night before Suzy was to be sent off to jail for vehicular manslaughter, intoxicated Bobby dashed out the door to take off in Suzy's car, which Suzy had allegedly sold him. Suzy was right behind him wielding a kitchen knife. The argument that ensued ended with Suzy breaking down:

Bobby: *(trying to calm Suzy down)* Okay, okay, you don't have to freak out.

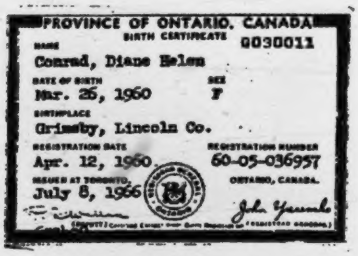
Suzy: Well I am freaking out. Do you wanna know why? Because I'm a freak Bobby. I'm a killer, a maniac, I don't even deserve to live.

Bobby: That's bullshit Suz.

Suzy: They hate me Bobby. I can see it in their eyes. I know why her husband hates me, but what did I do to all of them?

Bobby: They just don't understand, Suz. They've always hated you even before the accident. They hate me too. They hate us because we have long hair and do drugs and don't live they want us to.

As well as putting myself at-risk through my association with these boys, even back then, I was trying to understand their risky, illicit experiences from their perspective.



PROVINCE OF ONTARIO, CANADA
BIRTH CERTIFICATE 0030011
NAME
Conrad, Diane Helen
DATE OF BIRTH Mar. 26, 1960
SEX F
BIRTHPLACE
Grimsby, Lincoln Co.
REGISTRATION DATE Apr. 12, 1960
REGISTRATION NUMBER 60-05-036957
ISSUED AT TORONTO, July 8, 1966
ONTARIO, CANADA.

Now, from my vantage point of researcher looking back, these artifacts reveal the risky experiences of my youth. They also reveal my perspectives, as a youth, around the very questions of youth behaviour that I am still investigating.

In exploring these artifacts and the stories they tell, I use my personal knowledge to help me in my research, and my research to help me make sense of my life experiences. The artifacts and stories help explain my personal connection to my research, express my subjectivity and vulnerability as a researcher (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Adding my stories to those of my students is also an ethical act through which I explore the relationship between the research participants and myself as researcher (Fine, et al., 2000). As a critical researcher, if I ask my participants to share their stories, I also have a responsibility to share mine. The disclosure of my "wayward" past, revealing things that are not usually talked about in an academic context, puts me in a risky position alongside the youth experiences I am investigating. It is an equitable and empathetic position from which to seek insight about risky behaviour. By taking the risk of exposing myself, I experience the anxieties associated with risk as well as the euphoria of exploring the edge of what counts as legitimate research. My disclosure undermines notions of power and authority traditionally associated with the role of the researcher.

My autoethnographic exploration, intended not as an act of self-discovery, but as a cultural (Ang, 1994) or sub-cultural self-reading, reveals the social location and sub-cultural understandings that I bring to my research. It is a deliberately constructed position from which to speak for political purposes. Combined, the findings from the Popular Theatre work with students, theory on risk taking, and my personal understandings via my stories and artifacts, provide a layered exploration (Ronai, 1999) of youth behaviour adding a messiness to "at-risk" that I hope presents a more just version of the truth. My intent is not to validate or legitimate risky youth behaviour, as its illegitimacy is what makes it significant. Nor do I mean to present risky youth experiences as unproblematic. Rather, I want to offer a counter-narrative (Foucault, 1977) that interrupts the "common sense" or taken-for-granted understandings of "at-risk." As attention to knowledge defined as illegitimate by the dominant discourse allows the possibility for things to be otherwise (Foucault, 1980), privileging the perceptions of youth regarding their risky behaviour opens a space for re-framing "at-risk," to present a more complex picture than one of deviance and deficiency currently suggested by the label – towards an understanding of youth and risk that more fully reflects their reality and better responds to their needs.

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Part IV – The Pedagogical Potential of Popular Theatre

. . . My autoethnographic writing explored my personal connections to my research. Later, in Part V, I explore the ethical concerns that the research presented. In a brief reprieve from the tangled terrain of my research, the following article, Paper 7, Popular Theatre: Empowering Pedagogy for Youth, takes a more practical approach. This article, addressed to an audience of drama educators, with implications for education in general, celebrates Popular Theatre as an effective pedagogical approach to drama education with youth . . .

Paper 7: Popular Theatre: Empowering[1] Pedagogy for Youth

Introduction

(Students and Teacher are gathered around the designated stage area engaged in acting out a situation based on students' experiences. The action has paused momentarily as Teacher questions students about issues that have been raised.)

***Teacher**: Okay. Put yourself in the shoes of the school administration for a second. Do you think there is a need for rules like: No drinking on the bus?*

***Tess**: Yes.*

***Shadzz**: But rules are made to be broken . . . you have to break the rules once in a while.*

***Teacher**: From the perspective of the administration is there a need for informers . . . to help enforce the rules?*

***Daryl**: Let them worry about their own rules . . . if they didn't find out we were drinking . . .*

***Lady**: We do need rules . . . drinking on the bus isn't good, but neither is informing.*

The above exchange was part of a discussion with high school students in response to a scene we created called *"The Bus Trip"* for a Popular Theatre project. Based on a story students told, the scene depicted an incident that had occurred at the school the previous year when a group of students were caught drinking alcohol on a school bus trip. Students took on roles and acted out the situation. A number of questions were raised (What motivated such risky behaviour? How did the school administration find out?), relevant to the emergent theme of our work, *"Life in the Sticks."* Initially, the students in this rural Alberta, community of majority Aboriginal[2] population, felt the issues they faced were due to where they lived. They argued, "Kids got into all kinds of trouble because they are bored." Through our Popular Theatre work, they had the opportunity to portray and re-examine their experiences of *Life in the Sticks.*

Throughout this paper, I draw on examples from our Popular Theatre project, in the form of scripted descriptions of our work, to explore the pedagogical potential of Popular Theatre as an approach to high school drama/theatre education[3] – as an empowering pedagogy for youth.

Popular Theatre as Pedagogy

Popular Theatre is best defined in terms of its intent as "a process of theatre which deeply involves specific communities in identifying issues of concern, analyzing current conditions and causes of a situation, identifying points of change, and analyzing how change could happen and/or contributing to the actions implied" (Prentki & Selman, 2000, p. 8). The educational, transformational and therapeutic effects of Popular Theatre within various contexts including adult education, community development, self-help groups and workers' movements have been documented (see Boal, 1979/74, 1992, 1995; Cohen-Cruz & Schutzman, 1994; Filewod, 1987a; Haedicke & Nellhaus, 2001; Kidd, 1984a-c; Prentki & Selman, 2000; Taylor, 2002). Examples of Popular Theatre approaches with youth both in and out of school settings also emphasize its pedagogical capacity (see Cloutier, 1997; Diamond, 2000; Eriksson, 1990; Patterson, 2001; Rinherd, 1992; Rhod, 1998).

Through the medium of drama/theatre, Popular Theatre combines popular education methods (Freire, 1973, 1976, 1988/1970, Hurst, 1995; Shor, 1987) and a participatory approach to research (Fals-Borda, & Rahman, 1991; Hall, 1979, 1981; Gaventa, 1988; McTaggart, 1997; Park, et al., 1993; Salzar, 1991[4]). Freire's popular education[5] methods in literacy developed to help people question the nature of their historical and social situations by not only reading the *word,* but reading their *world,* with the goal of acting as subjects in the creation of a more just society. Freire rejected the predominant system of education as a "banking model," in which students were passive recipients of the teacher's knowledge, a system inherently oppressive and dehumanizing. Rather, he believed, education should be "the practice of freedom" (Freire, 1988, p. 15) involving a dialogic exchange between teachers and students, where both learned, questioned, reflected and participated in meaning-making.

Participatory research grew out of the popular education movement, emphasizing shared ownership of the research process - research "for," "with" and "by" rather than "on" people. Community-based identification and analysis of social issues stressed the inherent capacity for participants to create knowledge based on their experiences, incorporating various cultural forms. As a group process, the knowledge produced through participatory research was socially heard, legitimized and added to the people's collective knowledge, empowering them to solve their own problems. Research was viewed as a tool for education, the development of consciousness and as mobilization for action - a process of transformative praxis (Fals-Borda, 1991).

Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979/74), a form of Popular Theatre, was Boal's response to Brecht (1964/57) and Freire (1988/70). Boal's theatre challenged traditional theatrical conventions in which spectators were passive onlookers. Like Brecht's Epic Theatre, Boal's theatre sought to break the illusion of the play to awaken critical consciousness. With Freire's influence, Boal took Brecht's concept of "alienation" a step further. In Boal's Image Theatre and Forum Theatre participants' experiences and understandings are codified in an image or scene. Boal makes the spectator a "spect-actor," by taking part in the action. Facilitated by the "Joker,[6]" after an image or scene is enacted, spect-actors can re-sculpt or add themselves to the image, stop the action to discuss plans for change, re-direct the action or take the place of a character seen as "oppressed" to try out different solutions to the problems presented. Later adaptations of Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Boal, 1995; Cohen-Cruz & Schutzman, 1994) avoided the restrictive categorization of groups or individuals as either "oppressed" or "oppressor," acknowledging the dynamic and changeable nature of power relations and the significance of individuals' inner struggles to their level of conscientization. With critical (social/political) analysis embedded in the process, even groups who do not identify themselves as oppressed, as was the case with the students in my study, can employ dramatic techniques to change the outcome of situations they identify as "problematic." Adaptations of Boal's Image Theatre and Forum Theatre give participants the opportunity to explore and reflect on situations and issues through acting out, engaging them in an embodied, experiential discussion. For Boal, theatre was a weapon to be used by the people towards the transformation of society – if not revolutionary itself at least "a rehearsal of revolution" (1979/1974, p. 155).

Popular Theatre then, draws on the experiences of the participants to create images and scenes and explore issues that they have identified as relevant to their lives through theatrical means. As issues-based theatre, the trappings of traditional theatre (set, props, lights, costumes, make-up, etc.) become secondary. Popular Theatre is more concerned with accessing honest responses to given situations through improvised drama than the "quality" of the performance in any traditional artistic sense. A performance is not judged as good or bad, rather as Kidd suggests, it "may lack the polish of professionalism but it will make up for this with the authenticity and concern of people who live the situation they are presenting . . . lack of technical skill will be overcome by great energy and vividness" (1984a, p. 8). Sincerity and passion are qualities that are valued.

"Life in the Sticks:" A Popular Theatre Project

For our Popular Theatre project, I spent one month in the rural Alberta community working with two mixed grade 10/11/12 drama classes. I was interested in better understanding the experiences of youth deemed "at-risk" and saw Popular Theatre as a potential method for drawing out and examining youths' experiences.

The students' regular drama teacher generally included an issues-based component in his drama program. Previous work with his classes included collective creation projects (Barnet, 1987; Berry & Reinbold, 1985; Filewod, 1987b) addressing teen issues, family violence, alcoholism, and gun safety; the creation of videos on AIDS and suicide prevention funded by grants from local organizations; and a play about teen alcoholism (McDonough, 1991) for which a group of his students had won best student director at the provincial drama festival. Some of the students with whom I worked had also taken part in one or more of these projects. The students were already familiar with issues-based or applied approaches to drama. I introduced adaptations of Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* as an alternative form.

The project was intended as a unit on Popular Theatre for the drama classes and a Popular Theatre project with a community of students. It was a participatory, performative inquiry into the experiences of these youth both for their personal/social development and for the purposes of my research. The students' familiarity with improvisational drama, and more importantly their comfort and willingness to use drama as a medium of expression and their openness to exploring issues through drama greatly, assisted in our process. I took on the roles of teacher, Popular Theatre facilitator and co-researcher. Since facilitating this project, I have gained additional theoretical knowledge as well as practical experience doing Popular Theatre. From my more advanced perspective, I am able to evaluate and critique the work we did then.

For the project, which we entitled *"Life in the Sticks,"* I chose to work with Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* form, with which I was familiar at the time. We began with a series of drama activities to build trust, to strengthen our sense of community and to enhance performance sensibilities (Boal, 1992), then we identified issues, created scenes and animated them using Image theatre and Forum Theatre techniques, improvising various alternatives[7]. The project culminated in Forum Theatre performances for a group of other students at their school and for a group of drama students at a neighbouring school.

Adaptations of Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* had excellent potential in this context. However, I have since gained a better understanding of Popular

Theatre based on its intentions rather than on any particular form or other and I now appreciate the advantages of allowing form, as well as content to emerge through the work. By imposing a form on our work, I may have limited the means and opportunities for students' expression through other cultural forms with which they might already have been familiar that may have been more appropriate or appealing to them. For this project, we did dabble in "graffiti art," for example, but could have done more with it. In other instances, I have found students to be responsive to cultural forms such as popular musical (rap or hip-hop), break-dancing, drawing and poetry.

Within the school context, where the expectation is for teachers to provide parameters for students' work (via mandated curriculum, short-term, long-term planning, etc.), my strategy of choosing the form seemed appropriate. Seeing such parameters as limitations, however, has implications for teaching practice. For the kind of "authentic" participation that Popular Theatre seeks, involvement and collective decision making at all levels is preferable. Other projects in which I have participated since, have effectively used music, dance, photography, poetry, script writing, drawing and graffiti art along with various forms of improvisational drama as means of expression. A Popular Theatre approach encourages experimentation with multiple forms and processes appropriate to the group.

The students did provide the content for our work. In the introductory phase, after telling students about Popular Theatre/Theatre of the Oppressed and presenting a series of exercises to foster a critical perspective[8], students began identifying issues in their lives. As our work progressed, they asked me what our play[9] was going to be about, but I did not have an answer. I expected them to determine the content; moreover I wanted issues or themes to emerge from our activities and discussion rather than just being decided. I carefully avoided imposing my interest in "at-risk" as the content for our exploration. The following excerpt illustrates the process of searching for emerging themes:

(Students and Teacher are sitting around on the drama room floor in the midst of discussion.)

***Smokey**: So what's our play going to be about?*

***Teacher**: Well, I don't know that. That's something we're going to have to decide together.*

***Crack**: We should do it about drugs and alcohol.*

***Flower**: Let's do it about teen violence.*

***Teacher**: That's certainly a very topical issue with those recent school shootings . . .*

***Dancer**: What about teen pregnancy.*

***Horse**: Or STD's & AIDS.*

***Shadzz**: Unemployment.*

***Smokey**: Criminal activity.*

***Sophia**: Abuse, depression, suicide.*

***Teacher**: Right . . . right . . . There are lots of issues that we could work on. It's not something that we have to decide right away. We don't necessarily have to decide on an issue at all. Let's just see what comes out of our discussion. Think about how the issues you've mentioned are relevant to your lives? Let's do something that is meaningful to you.*

***Shadzz**: These are issues in our lives.*

***Teacher**: Is there one issue in particular . . . or what is it about all these issues that is relevant? How do they connect?*

***Flower**: It's just the kind of things that go on out here.*

***Horse**: Kids are getting into all kinds of trouble.*

***Tess**: It's because we've got nothing better to do, that's why.*

***Smokey**: Ya.*

***Tess**: Kids get into trouble because they are bored.*

***Joe**: Especially in a place like this . . . this hick town . . . there's nothing to do.*

***Teacher**: So . . . sex, violence, crime, drugs, suicide . . . that's all about being bored?*

***Joe**: Damn right.*

(sounds of agreement around the room)

***Teacher**: Is it about the place? . . . A rural community? . . . Small town life? . . . Life in a hick town?*

***Horse**: Life in the Sticks.*

***Teacher**: "Life in the Sticks." Hmmm. Thanks Horse. Maybe that that is something we can work with.*

The devising process continued with other activities to further specify the theme/topic for our work. Students wrote words, slogans, expressions and/or drew pictures on large sheets of mural paper (our graffiti wall) to represent what *"Life in the Sticks"* meant to them and then sculpted images of sub-themes that emerged to explore and share their embodied understandings. Then students told stories of their experiences and acted out situations based on them. The more we explored attitudes and delved deeper into the issues that arose, the more willing students were to concede that more than the rural environment and boredom were at the root of their "problems." This new attitude was evident in an interview I conducted with a group of the students towards the end of the process. The following scripted description is based on a transcribed audio recording of the interview.

(Teacher and a small group of students who have volunteered to be interviewed, sit on the floor in a drama room, huddled around a microphone.)

***Teacher**: Okay, I'm recording this are you ready? "Life in the Sticks!" What's it all about?*

***Flower**: What do you mean?*

***Teacher**: Well . . . look at the scenes we created. They are about taking risks, alcohol, addiction, boredom . . .*

***Shadzz**: Ya . . .*

***Flower**: We live in the sticks . . . we have nothing else to do.*

***Teacher**: Think about the characters in the scenes . . . Does living in the sticks make them who they are?*

***Flower**: It's about their habits.*

***Teacher**: And where do these habits come from?*

***Daryl**: Bad people. Bad habits come from bad people. (Everyone laughs.)*

***Teacher**: Do you really think you're bad people Daryl?*

***Daryl**: Just kidding. (More laughter.)*

***Teacher**: What's this play about?*

***Daryl**: It's about life in the sticks.*

***Flower**: It's about what teenagers do down here . . . same old, same old.*

***Shadzz**: Problem life. Problems people have.*

***Teacher**: Where do these problems come from?*

***Flower**: Just wanting to be with your friends and going along with what they do.*

***Daryl**: Wanting to be cool.*

***Flower**: Not because you want to be cool, because you don't want to be left out – and not just because you want to follow. Just because you want to.*

***Lucky**: But then if everybody just wants to belong . . . I drink because so-and-so drinks. He drinks because . . . why don't you just quit . . . you drink because it's your own choice. It's not to fit in . . . I don't drink because I want to be cool with you guys. I drink with my parents. I drink alone . . .*

***Flower**: You drink just because you want to and do anything else because you want to.*

***Daryl**: But it also depends on how you want to drink. You can drink to get drunk. You can drink just to have a few . . .*

***Teacher**: So is it true to say that where you live only has so much influence on a person?*

***Lucky**: But life in the sticks is a choice. You choose to live here.*

***Daryl**: Why did you come here?*

***Teacher**: Well . . . as I said on the first day . . . Daryl, I know you weren't there for that discussion . . . I previously worked with inner-city kids, incarcerated youth, Native students . . . I guess I'm interested . . . Shadzz called them "bad-asses" . . . the label that's often used is "at-risk" . . . I'm interested in working with "at-risk" students. I really don't like the label, but it's something that I'm exploring in my work . . . Students that maybe don't have all the advantages that middle-class kids might have - kids that are outside the mainstream of society or disadvantaged in one way or another – kids from poor families, teenage moms, living on their own going to school, kids in a* *rural community, minority kids . . . Native kids are often put into that category too . . . So how do you respond to that label "at-risk" youth?*

***Shadzz**: We're not disadvantaged.*

***Daryl**: Ya, we have a peaceful place, clean air and we can shoot ducks, bear, moose . . .*

***Lucky**: We can go fishing.*

***Flower**: What's mainstream?*

***Teacher**: Mainstream . . . you know, like the majority of people in Canada . . .*

***Flower**: You mean like white?*

***Teacher**: White and middleclass.*

***Lucky**: There's lots of people here who are middle-class.*

***Flower**: "At-risk" makes us sound like we're a bunch of alcoholics, drug addicts and bums or something.*

***Elizabeth**: It seems that . . . like we're judged because we're Native.*

***Daryl**: That's the stereotype of Native.*

***Shadzz**: We're judged by where we live.*

***Teacher**: That's interesting, Flower like what you're saying . . .The label makes you sound like you're alcoholics and drug addicts. You're resisting that label . . . but in Life in the Sticks you're saying that those are problems. So, how does that go together?*

***Flower**: It just doesn't make sense . . . That's what "at-risk" sounds like, what you're saying. But in the scenes it's not as if we're total alkys hard up for drinks all the time and drug addicts. It's just what we do over here. It's not as if it's a problem, eh?*

***Elizabeth**: For some people it's a problem.*

***Flower**: Ya, for some people, but not for everybody.*

***Elizabeth**: Some can handle it.*

***Flower**: That label makes us sound like everybody here is at-risk. But, it's not like that.*

Our Popular Theatre work helped the students re-evaluate some of the taken-for-granted beliefs they initially claimed. The common practice of bumming cigarettes, for example, was reframed as the result of a habit that individuals should kick if they could not afford it. They conceded that sexist humour, though funny could be hurtful to some. They rejected the act of presenting an ultimatum to a friend as a solution to conflict. At first, they claimed that kids got into trouble out of boredom in the rural locale. Then, in the interview, they claimed that their behaviour was a matter of personal choice or habit not determined by their environment. The place, the rural environment, initially identified as cause for boredom was reframed as an advantage. For them, the thought of being negatively judged by others for their behaviour, race/culture or where they lived was unacceptable. They rejected the notion "at-risk," instead reclaiming their sense of agency. While these students did not articulate why they made the choices they made, other than "because you want to," their responses being perhaps instinctively defensive, yet, taking responsibility for their behaviour instead of placing the blame elsewhere was a step towards empowerment. Further dramatization and discussion around the psychological and/or social factors contributing to the choices they make would have been valuable.

Empowering Pedagogy for Youth

In my experience, the real empowering potential of Popular Theatre for youth is in providing them the opportunity to speak out about their experiences and perceptions of the world. Through improvised drama, students represent perceptions of their reality for themselves and others. Performance is both symbolic and reflexive (Schechner, 1985). The performed representations are emotional, embodied and based in experience. The actors' experiences are codified (Freire, 1988/70) in the drama and through various techniques the improvised scenes are opened up for re-examination. The re-examination often occurs from the perspective of the character being portrayed with attitudes similar to and yet different from those of the actor – what Schechner calls the "not me" and the "not not me." In an early improvisation of *The Bus Trip,* for example, Daryl played the friend of Shadzz who bought the alchohol. When Shadzz asked Daryl for money, Daryl hesitated. When I questioned him in character about his hesitation, Daryl answered in character, "I don't want to drink." This elicited a round of laughter from the class for apparently this was out of character for Daryl the actor. While the class's laughter no doubt complicated the message that Daryl took away from the experience, he did have the chance to try out the attitude and play the part of the reluctant drinker/risk-taker as a possible rehearsal for future action.

In this way, the drama allows distance from an issue and a trying on of attitudes different from one's own. Whether spoken from the perspective of a participant in drama activity (a player in a game or a figure in an image for example), a character, or as a member of the audience, who themselves are "spect-actors" in Boal's (1979/74) terms, discussion that emerges from a dramatic process is grounded in the shared dramatic experience.

According to Garoian (1999), performance opens a liminal pedagogical space that allows for reflexive learning in which

> multicentric and dialogic processes recognize the cultural experiences, memories, and perspectives – participants' multiple voices – as viable content . . . encourage participant discussions of complex and

> contradictory issues . . . [and] strategies of inclusion involve the participation of the observer (p. 67).

Furthermore, improvised drama applies a "constructivist" model that has been show to be an effective strategy to involve students, including students "at-risk," in the learning process (Baruth & Manning, 1995; Marchesi, 1998). Popular Theatre works with curriculum that is relevant to students' life experiences focusing on the affective domain, stressing personal development and values clarification, which makes learning understandable, interesting and motivating. Content, which students determine, is active and flexible with varying levels of depth. Students framed as co-researchers of issues relevant to them can see themselves as contributing to vital knowledge production (Fals-Borda, 1991). By giving students time, attention and voice, by including their knowledge in the curriculum, they are acknowledged and legitimated within the school context. Furthermore, the risk-taking involved in performance offers youth the kind of excitement and bonding opportunities that they often seek in their out of school activities (Timberg, 1992; Bell & Bell, 1993). Drama is also fun.

In *"The Bus Trip,"* just prior to the moment excerpted in the introduction of this paper, our improvisation around the bus trip incident led to a discussion about the students' loathing of peer informants:

***Teacher**: Everyone who was on the bus come and take a seat here . . . It's the day after the bus trip. You've all been called down to the office. Let's hear your inner dialogue now.*

(Teacher goes around and touches characters on the shoulder one by on to hear what they are thinking.)

***Daryl**: Shit! Now I'm in big trouble. My parents are going to kill me.*

***Joe**: What's going on? I didn't do anything.*

***Tess**: I only took one drink.*

***Shadzz**: No problem. It's cool. They don't know anything.*

***Lady**: I hope they don't find out I told.*

***Teacher**: So you did tell on them. Why did you do that?*

***Lady**: I was mad at Tess.*

***Teacher**: Is that why people tell . . . for revenge?*

***Carlos**: And to look good in front of the teachers.*

***Teacher**: So how do you feel about informers?*

***Shadzz**: Informers? . . . They're rats!*

***Lady**: They suck!*

***Teacher**: And what would you do if you found out that someone informed?*

***Shadzz**: Beat them up, or if it's a girl, you get a girl to beat them up.*

***Teacher**: Does beating them up solve anything?*

***Daryl**: Yes, it stops them from doing it again.*

Students' views about informers and rules (as described in the introductory excerpt) were elicited through the collective re-enactment of the incident. This was students' popular knowledge which they shared and legitimated within their community. While these attitudes may be considered subversive from an authoritarian perspective, this knowledge too must be acknowledged as legitimate in its own right. Popular knowledge is claimed to have its own rationality and causality, which has allowed marginalized groups to negotiate and survive their context (Fals-Borda, 1982). Furthermore, I suggest, students' knowledge has implications for positive changes to the structures of schooling that must be considered.

On another occasion, a young female student shared a story about a self-reflective moment she had late one evening as she waited alone for her companion to return with more beer. She sat alone talking to her empty beer can about her predicament, asking herself why she was there alone, drinking beer and talking to herself. This story became a scene with the student volunteering to play herself, two others playing her conscience – giving her "good" and "bad" advice. Their conversation explored issues of substance abuse and self-esteem. In this case, the questions the young woman asked herself became questions for investigation by the group.

The students' favourite scene, one that we spent many class sessions exploring and also performed for our two audiences, was entitled *"Friends."* The scene portrayed a triangle of love/friendship relationships between a young woman, her boyfriend, and her visiting friend (sometimes played as a male, sometimes female). The young woman's desire to spend an evening designated for her boyfriend, with her friend instead, created tension. Our improvisations explored the expectations friends have (or should have) of each other and various conflict resolution strategies.

Students enjoyed the *"Friends"* scene and it got the most enthusiastic responses from audiences because the issue of friendship relationships was important to them. In this way, by acknowledging their sub-cultural knowledge and values, students are drawn in, making the work engaging and relevant to them. Though this scene may not have had a strong socially critical dimension, reflecting on their experiences as a peer group had the capacity to increase their understanding of themselves and their social milieu, helping them make better sense of their reality.

Participatory Relationships

Doing Popular Theatre within a school setting implies an untraditional kind of teacher/student relationship. For students to take ownership of the work and feel free to express themselves, a participatory (subject/subject not subject/object) relationship is required. Many taken-for-granted school practices, such as grading, promote authoritarian relationships that obstruct the kind of authentic participation sought in Popular Theatre. For the purposes of my research, with agreement from the drama teacher, I did not grade students for their work. Nevertheless, concerns also arose around expectations for me to monitor attendance, restrict movement around and in/out of class, check disruptive behaviour, and force participation. While their regular drama teacher was always present or nearby to serve as the ultimate authority, I allowed students to come and go as they needed. To some extent, they regulated their own movements, often putting up their hands to go to the washroom even when I did not require them to. I addressed disruptions with low-key responses to re-focus the work and gently encouraged dissenters to participate, still leaving them the choice to opt out. While any redistribution of power within the classroom is not easily achieved, often counter to the acculturated expectations of students, teachers and administrators, participatory relationships are worth striving for based on mutual respect and shared goals.

A Popular Theatre approach also allows for flexible, less prescribed, work patterns, which accommodated our context (and others in which I have worked with so called "at-risk" youth). Improvised drama avoids the need for scripts to be memorized. Students in our project were able to take on roles and act out the situations based on their experiences. Competition for roles was eliminated as students substituted roles as needed or wished. Students knew the scenario enough to improvise any part. Even genders were interchangeable or scenes were easily adapted.

While there were students who participated only tentatively and/or absented themselves regularly, a serious problem within the context of school, a core group of students were active and enthusiastic. A student from one class regularly attended the other class during his spare. Others also dropped in when they could. Another student, registered in both classes, initially volunteered to help only with technical aspects of the project, but soon became actively involved in devising and acting. Dissenters had the option of making alternative arrangements with their drama teacher.

Social Action

As a culminating activity, we performed a number of our scenes for a group of students at the school and traveled to a neighbouring school to present our work. Students performed their scenes in a Forum Theatre format, with me as "Joker." We engaged students in the audience to discuss issues, re-direct actors or take their place on stage to try out their ideas. Though we did not do so, ideally students could also be given the opportunity to take on the role of Joker to lead their peers in discussion.

The role of facilitator or "Joker" (in Boal's terms) though, similar to McLaren's (1993) notion of teacher-as-liminal-servant, is a complex one. Several

Popular Theatre courses and many opportunities to practice facilitation still leave me challenged. As well as a repertoire of techniques, this kind of facilitation requires openness to the issues being explored, sensitivity to participants' needs and perspectives; a responsiveness to teachable moments, to sensing just the right moment to intercede; and keen questioning skills, which direct the discussion/action without controlling it. The challenge in learning to facilitate is that while techniques can be learned, sensitivity and responsiveness can only develop with experience. Often, only in hindsight could I see opportunities for intervention that might have made a difference towards unsettling their taken-for-granted beliefs towards affecting the way they lived their lives. For *"Life in the Sticks,"* my limited experience at facilitation limited what we achieved. The depth of critical reflection and new understanding to which the work took us was modest.

Nevertheless, some valuable insights were gained both during the devising/animation process and in our performances for audiences. Students' responses to the *"Friends"* scene (the love/friendship triangle described earlier) suggest that it had the most relevance for them. This is likely where our drama work had the most impact. Of all the work we did with the *"Friends"* scene, two particular moments from two different Forum Theatre performances serve as good examples depicted in the following excerpts.

In the first excerpt, our group of "actors" had already presented (improvised anew each time) some version of our "real" scene ending in conflict. This was followed by discussion leading to the improvisation of an "ideal" ending, which achieved compromise. Now, in attempting to move from "real" to "ideal," by involving "spect-actors" in trying out alternative solutions to the conflict, some unexpected issues were raised. We could never have planned or foreseen the solutions that were offered and the places the discussion took us:

***Teacher**: (In the role of Joker.) Okay, so we've tried a few solutions, but we haven't really got away from the arguing, have we? Does someone else want to try?*

***Henry**: I do.*

***Teacher**: Okay, come on up here. And remember . . . you want to try to move towards some kind of compromise but you want the solution to be realistic not magical . . .*

(Henry comes up to replace the boyfriend character. The scene resumes from where it left off.)

***Henry**: (playing Elizabeth's boyfriend stops the car) We're gonna stop it right here. Alright Elizabeth, this is how it is. Either you come home with me now to watch movies or you can just get out of my truck and go to the party with Sophia. What'll it be?*

***Elizabeth**: I want to go to the party.*

***Henry**: Then get out.*

***Elizabeth**: Well alright then! (to her girlfriend Sophia) Come on Sophia, let's go. (The two girls get out of the truck and exit, leaving Henry alone.)*

(The audience roars – some laughing, some clapping, others booing.)

***Teacher**: Okay, okay. Well, what did we see the boyfriend character do? What was his strategy?*

***Horse**: He did the right thing!!*

***Stix**: He forced her to make a choice.*

***Teacher**: He gave his girlfriend a choice, an ultimatum, didn't he? Either me or her and Elizabeth chose to go with her friend. (to Henry playing the boyfriend character) How do you feel now?*

***Henry**: I didn't want her to go partying.*

***Teacher**: Did you succeed? What about your relationship with your girlfriend?*

***Henry**: Whatever.*

***Teacher**: (to audience) I heard someone say, "He shouldn't have . . ."*

***Leigh**: He should never have put his girlfriend in a position like that.*

***Lady**: Friends shouldn't make each other choose.*

***Carlos**: I think it was better for the guy.*

***Sophia**: You have to trust your girlfriend.*

Henry's intervention, presenting his girlfriend an ultimatum, was applauded by some and rejected by others. The ardent exchange that students had articulated their beliefs and delineated values in relation to love/friendship relations.

The following intervention, I suspect was delivered to get a laugh, nevertheless, significant gains were made:

***Teacher**: So we've had several audience interventions, but . . . we haven't really got much closer to our "ideal" scene, have we? . . . Let's try another one . . . Anyone?*

(Frootloop, from our group, steps in to replace the actor in the boyfriend's spot. He takes a seat behind the steering wheel and continues the scene.)

***Frootloop**: I'm gonna play the boyfriend. (in character to his girlfriend played by Flower and her male friend played by Smokey.) Alright . . . this is the way I see it . . . just listen to me for a minute . . . shhhh! I have a little sister . . . she's pretty nice . . . I say we all go to the lounge for a couple hours . . . then we go to the video store and back to my place. Well this guy's a guy and she's a girl . . . you know what I mean . . .*

(The other actors in the scene are speechless, caught by surprise. The audience is laughing. The male friend character can hardly believe his luck. He gives Frootloop the thumbs up. The girlfriend character, however, looks very uncomfortable.)

***Smokey**: (playing the male friend) Good call . . . I like this guy's style . . . Let's go pick up your sister!*

***Teacher**: Freeze. The friend character is happy with this solution, but the girlfriend doesn't look satisfied at all. (to Flower playing the girlfriend character) What is your inner monologue? . . . Let's hear what's going through your head right now.*

***Flower**: (playing the girlfriend) I just can't believe that he offered him his sister.*

***Teacher**: Is it because of the sister or is it the principle of the thing?*

***Flower**: Well, I don't really care . . . it's not a problem. It's just funny because most older brothers really watch over their younger sisters.*

***Teacher**: So, she doesn't like the way he's treating his sister . . . Frootloop would you really treat your younger sister this way?*

***Frootloop**: Are you crazy?*

***Teacher**: Okay . . . so was this scene realistic? Even Frootloop said that he wouldn't really treat his sister that way.*

***Tess**: Well how about . . . instead of the sister . . . if they just pick up one of his female friends.*

***Teacher**: Frootloop, can we try that?*

***Frootloop**: Sure. (They resume the scene.)*

In offering up his sister, Frootloop's bluff was called. If only briefly, the discussion revealed some heartfelt ideals regarding brother/sister relationships. I suggest that such spontaneous peer exchange of knowledge can have an impact beyond any instruction that an adult/teacher can offer.

Our two Forum Theatre performances were the social actions in which our Popular Theatre project culminated. While appropriate for a drama class context, from a Popular Theatre/participatory research perspective, I question the real efficacy of our performances as social actions beyond the classroom. I am skeptical of the extent to which any significant new awareness based on our work carried into participants' and/or audiences' lives. In any case, it is difficult to know the impact of this kind of work as the effects are rarely immediate, observable, measurable or easily articulated. Our discussions had the potential to perhaps influence individuals' choices/behaviours in some small ways. A more experienced facilitator would, no doubt, have been able to take students deeper into critical reflection towards meaningful change. I do believe that personal and social impact via Popular Theatre in the school context is possible. Our Popular Theatre work was not a "rehearsal for revolution," as Boal's (1979/74) *Theatre of the Oppressed* intended, but perhaps it did serve as a rehearsal for the students' future choices regarding some of their behaviours and interpersonal relations.

Beyond Curricular Expectations

Curricula in drama education espouse goals of personal and social development through participation in and reflection on the dramatic experience, development of communication skills through the practice of dramatic disciplines, and appreciation for drama/theatre as a process and an art form (Alberta Learning, 1989). Our Popular Theatre project met these expectations and beyond. The project met my goals of engaging students in a Popular Theatre process to explore issues they identified as relevant and search for strategies for future application. The following excerpts from student journals indicate their responses to Popular Theatre, youth issues, working with others and their sense of enjoyment/success:

"Popular theatre gets people thinking and it actually makes sense if you work on it. Once we started constructing scenes it became interesting."

"This type of theatre is very effective in solving problems, especially working with people who have a hard time admitting their problems and don't want to get help or are too insecure to get help. It is neat how people can interpret things or scenes in so many different ways and take a little piece of information from the scenes or discussions to help them solve their problems."

"Popular theatre is not only about helping other people through your acting but helping yourself through your acting."

"I learned things like not only to take one view of issues like drugs, sex, alcohol and everything else that could affect you and your family and peers."

"I can totally relate to the Betty scene. Things in a small town cannot be kept a secret. I have also experienced boredom many times. Most of the scenes are not specific to "Life in the Sticks" – they can relate to anywhere teenagers are present."

"Where we went people could really relate to how we live."

"I learned how students in my class work together. Many people were uneasy about presenting the topics . . . many giggles came from our class." "It was interesting to act with another class from somewhere else."

"In [the neighbouring school] the comments and suggestions were overwhelming and the audience wasn't afraid to act out their suggestions."

"I did not think that the audience would have so many views about the plays we did this afternoon."

"I like acting, having fun, expressing myself and making people laugh – with the popular theatre I was allowed to do that."

"Drama is fun, thrills, experience and true, deep emotion."

"I like the idea of having to do something spontaneous in front of an audience because you never know the outcome. It could either be funny, moderate or serious. I like surprises."

As indicated, Popular Theatre also appeals to students' sense of enjoyment of this risky activity within a safe environment.

Conclusion

"Life in the Sticks" suffered a number of limitations, not least of all my own inexperience as a facilitator as I have already indicated. While from a research perspective, relatively little time was spent with participants, within a high school context, where class time is precious and curricular demands high, a four week drama unit is justifiable. While more time spent on a Popular Theatre process allows greater depth, in one month we seemed to exhaust the focus and attention to the topic that students and I were able to sustain. No doubt, the fact that Popular Theatre values did not easily correspond to the expectations/structure of the institution also limited the depth we achieved. The space that can be created for Popular Theatre within the school context is shaped by the environment and the players. Although the school, the drama teacher and the students were all receptive to the work I proposed, I wonder just how much students were willing to disclose/share within the classroom setting. We worked with the stories that students were comfortable sharing, but what of the stories that could not be told.

Despite the limitations of the school context, I believe Popular Theatre can have a positive effect. Often attempts are made to meet the needs of "at-risk" youth through add-on or pull-out programs. Ultimately these do no more than perpetuate the problem faced by already marginalized youth. Rather, I suggest, teachers need to create classroom environments and develop pedagogical approaches that benefit all students.

As I have tried to illustrate in this paper, the pedagogical practices and beliefs that underlie Popular Theatre can make it a potentially empowering pedagogy for youth. These practices include: creating space for youth to speak out about their perspectives; drawing on their experiences to create drama and explore issues that they identify as relevant to their lives; acknowledging and legitimizing their individual and collective knowledge in the creation of new knowledge; allowing space for youth to learn from each other; allowing both content and form to emerge though dramatization/discussion; exploring multiple appropriate cultural forms of expression; encouraging embodied and experiential exploration through drama; establishing participatory relationships between all members of the group based on mutual respect and shared goals; fostering a collective work environment; working within the school context to minimize power differentials; developing flexible work patterns to accommodate students' needs; appealing to students' agenda, needs, interests, enjoyment, comfort levels and willingness to contribute; as facilitator, taking on the role of "Joker;" and including opportunities for social action beyond the classroom. Furthermore, I believe that many of these approaches are applicable beyond Popular Theatre practice alone. Learner directed curricula, participatory relationships and collective work environments are healthful for learning. Improvised drama can be used as a medium for exploration in various contexts and the role of "Joker," in its sensitivity and critical approach has useful implications for the teacher. In the way they delegate ultimate power to the teacher, I believe that many practices largely taken-for-granted by the school system, must be interrogated. Popular Theatre practice suggests ways in which education can move towards "the practice of freedom" (Freire, 1988, p. 15).

Notes

[1] I re-claim the right to use the word "empower" in the Freirian (1988) spirit - to open a space for the powerless to deploy power. I do not presume to be able to empower others or that empowerment is mine to give. Nor do I use the word "empower" as it has been appropriated by neo-liberalism (to mean "effective?") or neo-conservatives (to mean "feel good?"). Similarly, I re-claim the right to use words like "authentic" (to mean "genuine" or "sincere") in their undiluted form, even if "authenticity" is only temporary and shifting. I concede that terms like "empower" and "authentic" are vague and unquantifiable. How can we know if someone is "empowered"? Can we ever achieve real "authenticity"? How do we define "community"? Can we speak of a coherent category "youth"? I find that such questions too quickly bring discussion to a halt. While I agree that challenging unproblematic assumptions about language usage is necessary, I will not focus my argument on matters of language here.

[2] The research project discussed here was planned with an interest in working with "at-risk" youth based on my prior experiences working with youth so deemed and my own experiences as a youth. Tragically, as I was to learn, whether in the inner-city, in the criminal justice system or in a rural community, being an "at-risk" youth in Alberta is highly correlated with being Aboriginal (Alberta Learning, 2001). I have since come to see the label "at-risk" as highly problematic. Elsewhere I re-frame "at-risk" based on our Popular Theatre work. Also, while in this paper I celebrate the opportunity that Popular Theatre provided students to speak out about their experiences, issues about their Aboriginal identity were only peripherally raised. Elsewhere I explore the possibilities for the absence of Aboriginal issues in our work, including how the structural conditions at the school might have worked to silence students – the majority of teachers, myself included, being White.

[3] Personal growth and social development are among the recognized benefits of drama/theatre education (see Alberta Learning, 1989; Bolton, 1979; Courtney, 1989; Heathcote, 1991; Jackson, 1993; Neelands, 1984; O'Neill, 1995; Saldaña, 1998; Way, 1967; Wagner, 1998; Warren, 1993). Drama is said to provide protective factors (Hawkins, 1996) for so called youth "at-risk" (see Furman, 1997; Timberg, 1992; Widdows, 1996; Wolfe, 1997). Issues-based or socially critical approaches to drama/theatre education are valued for their empowering effects (see Doyle, 1993; Errington, 1993; Hoepper, 1991; Norris, 1998; Moon, 1993).

[4] I found Salzar's (1991) participatory research project conducted in Bogotá, Columbia with a group of child labourers especially relevant to my project, involving a younger, potentially "at-risk" or marginalized community of participants.

[5] Paulo Freire developed his Pedagogy of the Oppressed in Brazil in the 1960s and 70s during a time of extreme political repression. How appropriate these methods are for our current context is debatable (see Ellsworth, 1989; Facundo, 1984; Kidd & Byram, 1983). I argue that popular education methods, Popular Theatre in particular, can, despite difficulties, be used effectively with marginalized groups in our society.

[6] Boal (1979/74) uses the term "Joker" for his role as facilitator in *Theatre of the Oppressed.* As well as facilitating the process, the "Joker" plays the questioner, the critical friend, devil's advocate, wild card or trickster in order to draw out participants' responses.

[7] Many of the techniques we used, adaptations of Boal's (1979/74, 1992) *Theatre of the Oppressed* and other drama/theatre activities are demonstrated in excepts of scripted descriptions which I wrote to talk about our work. I do not describe specific techniques in any detail, but refer to the sources. This paper is not intended as a how to guide, an advocate for any particular techniques or form, but as an incitement to adopting pedagogical practices underpinning Popular Theatre as exemplified in my discussion.

[8] These exercises for critical thinking which I also used in my master's research (Conrad 2001) are adapted from (Hoepper, 1991) and include a video clip from The God's Must Be Crazy to show contrasting ideologies, a brainstorming activity of social structures and institutions that are sites for transmitting ideology and the questioning of common taken-for-granted beliefs.

[9] Our Popular Theatre work did not involve a play in any traditional sense or any written script to be performed, as such. A few cursory notes on index cards served as memory aids for our series of scenes with regards to characters, storyline and issues raised. The scripted excerpts included in this paper are from a series of scripted descriptions I wrote afterwards to depict what I considered salient moments during our work. They depict moments of discussions we had, activities we did, the devising and animation process, and the performance workshops with audiences. The scripts are based on my field-notes and journals, audio and videotapes and student journals. They are self-conscious reconstructions of what actually happened for the purposes of talking about them and as examples of our work. They provide more direct access to the moments depicted, preserving more of the context and students' voices, than would other forms of writing. The scenes are partly dramatized transcriptions but also partly fictionalized or re-constructed for practical, thematic and artistic purposes. This type of interpretation/translation of "raw data" into ethnodramatic script or performative ethnography is discussed in Conrad (2002). (See also Denzin, 1997; Saldaña, 2003; Turner & Turner, 1982).

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Part V – Ethical Considerations

. . . The process of doing this performative research in relation with a group of living, breathing humans and then reflecting on and writing about it raised a burden of ethical questions with which I struggled long and hard. Paper 8, Entangled in the Sticks: Ethical Conundrums of Popular Theatre as Pedagogy & Research, explores some of the dilemmas that arose. I hope that honestly voicing my concerns will move me towards better, more ethical practice in the future . . .

Paper 8: Entangled in the Sticks: Ethical Conundrums of Popular Theatre as Pedagogy & Research

Introduction

In the participatory research project I undertook as part of my doctoral study, I struggled with many ethical entanglements, which are the topic of this paper. My study involved a Popular Theatre project with a group of high school drama students in a rural Alberta community of majority Aboriginal population. The questions that guided my inquiry were: *What are the perceptions of youth regarding their experiences that may deem them "at risk"? How can Popular Theatre, as pedagogy and as research, be used to explore youth experiences?* My interest in "at-risk" was based on my previous work with youth so deemed (in inner-city high schools, a youth drop in center, a young offender facility and two Northwest Territories communities); the fact that on several occasions youth indicated to me that they found the label "at-risk" offensive; and on my own risky experiences as a youth.

Popular Theatre became the participatory research method[1] through which we explored students' perceptions. Defined by its intentions of personal and social transformation, Popular Theatre is a process of theatre involving communities in identifying issues, analyzing conditions and identifying points of change (Prentki & Selman, 2000). The theme that emerged for our project was *"Life in the Sticks,"* based on the students' initial claim that the issues they faced were determined by the rural environment in which they lived. Our work helped them re-examine aspects of their lived experiences.

Ethical questions raised by the work included: How can I as researcher legitimately write about, represent and/or speak for/on behalf of these students – Aboriginal (culturally Other) and potentially "at-risk?" (While part of my interpretation of our work problematized the label "at-risk," I question whether using the label is justified in any case.) How can my writing/interpretation honestly and legitimately represent the participatory, Popular Theatre process in which we engaged? Can genuine Popular Theatre occur within an institutional/school context? Does what the students were willing to share in this context represent them? From a pedagogical perspective, is it ethical to do Popular Theatre, which often raises difficult personal issues, in the classroom? What are the ethical implications of performing sensitive subject matter? What of the voices/perspectives that were silenced in our attempt at participatory research? How does one judge the quality of research from an ethical standpoint?

In the following pages, I address these concerns, though I realize they cannot be definitively solved. By raising ethical considerations as part of my research, I hope to self-reflexively examine my intentions, account for the circumstances under which knowledge was produced, explore the potential effects of my work and acknowledge the ethical tangles that it provoked.

Clarifying My Ethical Stance

The ethical stance towards which I have moved intuitively in doing and reflecting on my research resembles what others have termed a feminist ethics of care (Edwards & Mauthner, 2002; Noddings, 1984). For Noddings, an ethics of caring begins from an innate feeling of care for the other, followed by a response to a corresponding ethical obligation – a response to the call "I must if I wish" (p. 88).

In research based on an ethics of care, ethical concerns are inherent to the researcher's view of social reality and therefore integral to both the intentions of the research (Edwards & Mauthner, 2002), as in research promoting social justice (an ethics of social justice) for which my research strove, and to the methodological approach taken (Finley, 2003). This ethical stance sees the researcher in relation to the research participants striving for the ethical ideal, a commitment to caring. An ethics of care is based in practical knowledge, concrete lived experience, emotionality and specificity to context. It involves 'care'ful judgement (Sevenhuijsen, 1998), attention to detail, attention to difference, respect and reciprocity in research relationships, a genuine concern with issues of power, and sense of personal responsibility (Edwards & Mauthner, 2002).

To avoid the essentialising tendencies of some feminist epistemology however, Walker (1997) describes her ethical stance as an "ethics of responsibility," resembling Lévinas's (1989) relational ethics, which also focuses on one's responsibility to the Other. Gillies and Alldred's (2002) "ethics of intention" emphasizes the political goals of feminist research. My ethical stance too hopes to avoid essentialising in favour of an emphasis on responsibility, relation to the Other and the intention of promoting social justice.

Denzin (2003) calls for "a performance ethics based on feminist, communitarian assumptions" (p. 242), which he also shows to be aligned with an indigenous research ethic. A performance-centered ethic conceives of performance as "a way of acting on the world in order to change it" (p. 228) in which "acting" includes performative speech acts (Austin, 1975; Butler, 1997), and the performative nature of naming (Bourdieu, 1990), as well as social dramas or moments of conflict in everyday life (Turner, 1982), cultural performances such as celebrations, rituals, public events and doing research (Conquergood, 1985), performances of race, gender, sexual orientation, age, etc., and theatrical performances and performance art (Boal, 1979/74; Garoian, 1999). Conquergood sees dialogical performance as a moral act, "a way of deeply sensing the other" (p. 3). Conquergood's dialogical performance stance

> struggles to bring together different voices, world views, value systems, and beliefs so that they can have a conversation with one another . . . to bring self and other together so that they can question, debate, and challenge one another . . . resist[ing] conclusions . . . committed to keeping the dialogue between performer and text open and ongoing . . . [it] does not end with empathy . . . there is always enough appreciation for difference so that the text can interrogate, rather than dissolve into the performer . . . [bringing] self and other together while it holds them apart (p. 9).

As such, ethical performance requires dialogue, care, responsibility and a focus on intent. In my search for social justice for youth in this study, my conception of justice concurs with a view that justice is a process involving such an ethical stance (Sevenhuijsen, 1998).

As I do, feminist scholars who have adopted an ethics of care often frame ethical considerations as unsolvable dilemmas rather than problems with rational solutions (Mauthner, et al, 2002; Ribbens & Edwards, 1998).

The Problem of Speaking for the Other

Central to critical research, is a concern for justice for one's research participants. If the research hopes to contribute to the emancipation of marginalized individuals and groups it must ensure that it does not reinforce oppression or do further violence. While the participatory aspect of this research via our Popular Theatre work gave participants an opportunity to voice their perspectives and explore issues relevant to them, my final interpretation/analysis of our work, done for the purposes of my doctoral dissertation, was an individual undertaking. In my interpretation of *"Life in the Sticks,"* the problem of speaking for the other arises. The questions to be addressed are: Who am I, as researcher, speaking for? Whom does the research benefit? (Alcoff, 1991; Fine et al., 2000).

When planning my research, I expressed an interest in better understanding the implications of the label and the experiences of youth defined as "at-risk." I was aware of and prepared to tackle (I thought) the potentially dangerous, alienating or "othering" effect of categorization and labeling.

I had not specifically sought to work with Aboriginal youth, but as I was to discover, whether in the inner-city, the criminal justice system or a rural community, being an "at-risk" youth in Alberta correlated with being Aboriginal (Alberta Learning 2001; Makokis, 2000). As non-Aboriginal I was hesitant to speak for/about Aboriginal issues, knowing that scholars within the Aboriginal community were better situated to this task. Having previously worked in two First Nations communities in the Northwest Territories and with Native youth in the inner-city, I was somewhat sensitized to issues that might affect Aboriginal youth, still I felt compelled to step aside based on my social location. However, I was unwilling to evade entirely the predicament of "at-risk" Aboriginal youth in Alberta. As it turned out, the majority of the people in the community in which I was to conduct my research were of Aboriginal descent (90% of the students at the school were Aboriginal), the community being in proximity to several Native reserves. Once the research site was confirmed, I resolved to confront any issues that might be raised to the best of my ability.

When I asked the regular drama teacher about his experiences of working with these students around issues of Aboriginal identity and race/racism, he suggested that racism would probably not come up as an issue. On other occasions, he said, "racism" had been raised by students in the context of Black/White relations, not specific to racism against Native people. In this rural community, in which the minority was the majority, was race to some extent taken-for-granted?

As our work progressed, it was true that issues of racism and/or any identifiably "Aboriginal" issues were raised only tentatively. Occasional reference was made to distinctly Aboriginal identity/culture, and while the content of our work was primarily student directed, this did not emerge as a focus[2]. The issues we explored were contextualized by students in terms of youth issues, initially as issues of rural youth, rather than issues particular to Aboriginal youth.

Furthermore, after presenting our drama work at a school in a neighbouring town (majority White), students' perceptions were affirmed. The issues our work raised were relevant not only to rural (and/or Aboriginal) youth but to youth elsewhere.

I am left questioning, however, to what extent the systemic conditions, the school context with its inherent power relations, overlaid by race – myself as White researcher/outsider and the majority of teachers at the school being White – may have worked to censor Aboriginal issues from our Popular Theatre work. Did students not see their issues as Aboriginal issues or did they censor themselves given the context? Did my social location contribute to silencing students? Did my inclination to retreat, to leave Aboriginal issues to Aboriginal scholars, contribute to avoiding or not hearing Aboriginal issues that were tentatively raised? Did I shirk my responsibility, do more violence than good, by retreating from speaking up for/on behalf of the racial Other (Alcoff, 1991)? In any case, had our work overtly addressed Aboriginal issues, the ethical discussion raised here regarding my social location as non-Aboriginal in relation to my research participants would have been more comprehensive. As it stands, I feel a greater obligation to account for my speaking for/about my participants as youth (labeled/mislabeled) "at-risk."

The Problem of the Label "At-risk"

That youth typically deemed "at-risk" might find the label demeaning and paternalistic should not be surprising. Mainstream literature in education uses the label to talk about students "at-risk" of failing, dropping out of school or who have already failed or dropped-out (the label is similarly used in health care and criminal justice). Based on a long list of risk factors (Catalano & Hawkins, 1995), the label portrays "at-risk" youth, their families and communities as somehow deficient or deviant, no doubt eliciting youth's rejection of the label.

Thus, I began my inquiry with an unsettling feeling towards the subject of my research, the label "at-risk," and the practice of labeling (National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1985). I was uncomfortable with the label but could not not address it either. "At-risk" was a problem I felt needed to be tackled. Aware of the inadequacies of making assumptions about youth as a coherent category (Yuval-Davis, 1997), let alone the dangers of applying a negative label, I proceeded with caution. I struggled to articulate the concept "at-risk" in a non-oppressive way. I wrote "at-risk" in quotations, prefixed it with "put," "placed," "deemed" or "so-called." I thought about not using the label at all. Ultimately, rather than to abandon "at-risk," I saw the need to reframe it based on the perceptions of youth. I sought to better understand youths' experiences, including behaviour that might put them "at-risk" from their own perspectives. The Popular Theatre process in which I engaged students, sought to hear what they had to say about their experiences as a step towards better understanding. Our theme *"Life in the Sticks,"* was not explicitly about "at-risk," but certainly spoke to this topic.

In my introduction to students, I carefully avoided using the label "at-risk," so as not to inadvertently suggest it as a theme. I wanted our work to depict students' interpretation of their issues. When I referred to my interest and experience in working with inner-city youth, young offenders, and Native students, one student interpreted this as an interest in working with "bad-asses."

Our subsequent work around issues that students identified as relevant to them focused on instances of rule-breaking, substance use, risky behaviour and conflict situations. That their representation of their experiences spoke so clearly to my interest was opportune. Or was it? How did the questions I asked shape students' responses? To what extent did my research agenda direct our Popular Theatre work? Am I guilty of exploiting, for the purposes of my research, the experiences of youth "at-risk?"

As Popular Theatre facilitator/teacher I, of course, had a measure of control over what happened day-to-day, regardless of how much I tried to give control to the group. As researcher, my interpretation of our participatory work was based, in part, on my interest in "at-risk." To what extent did my interpretation, expressed in my dissertation, distort students' voices, slanting what they said to conform to what I wanted to hear? Was I listening particularly for issues/incidents that addressed my thesis topic? Did my topic take precedence, perhaps at the expense of other important issues that remain unheard?

In our Popular Theatre work, students embraced the opportunity to talk about issues that were relevant to them, to speak out, to tell their stories, to make a connection to their own lives. In this respect, our work had empowering potential. On the other hand, by interpreting their stories and our process in the context of "at-risk," by using the label, albeit within the context of problematizing it, am I, nevertheless, re-inscribing a negative portrayal of these youth and youth in general, re-constructing/distorting their subject positions to be read by others? Am I contributing to silencing youth by speaking for/about them? Am I contributing to their re-oppression? These are some of the unsettling ethical questions that continue to burden my inquiry into "at-risk."

Articulating My Social Location

A concern for ensuring ethical research relationships calls for the researcher to make explicit the social location from which she/he interprets the stories/voices of participants (Alcoff, 1991; Fine, 1994; Fine, et al., 2000). This view acknowledges that there is no neutral position from which to speak – from where one speaks affects the meaning of what is said. Making one's social location explicit involves what Fine (1994) calls working the hyphen between self and other that "both separates and merges personal identities with our inventions of Others" (p. 70).

In my writing about our Popular Theatre project *"Life in the Sticks,"* I include segments of autobiographical writing, which draw attention to my identity/subjectivity as researcher in relation to my research participants and my connectedness to the research. In response to the call to articulate my location, to interrogate the one who is researching, I could not deny the significance of my personal history to the research I was conducting. Part of the reason I chose to work with/research "at-risk" youth, I realized, was to better understand my own risky experiences as a youth.

In my autoethnographic inquiry (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), I recovered a collection of artifacts from my past (Slattery, 2001) and wrote stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) of my youthful risk-taking experiences that resonated with what the students and theory were revealing. My autobiographical work was not intended as a personal act of self-discovery. I made an effort to guard against becoming too self-absorbed to lose sight of the Other of my research. Rather, it was intended as a cultural self-reading (Ang, 1994), an interpretation of my experience in relation to my subcultural understandings. I made use of my personal history as the basis for my understanding of the youth with whom I worked - my artifacts[3] and stories providing an additional perspective (myself as youth) in my interpretation. I also explored the places where my present location as teacher/researcher conflicted with my empathic understanding.

Ellis & Bochner (2000) and Fine, et al. (2000) call for researchers to reveal something of themselves, to make themselves vulnerable and open to hearing the truth in the research stories they are told. In this sense, my autoethnography is an ethical act that discloses things about me including my risky stories. In our Popular Theatre work, I asked students to take the risk of sharing personal stories and enacting incidents from their lives. I make use of their risky stories, so it is only ethical that I share mine. Risky personal stories (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), traditionally not told in academic contexts, push the boundaries of what is appropriate in scholarly discourse, making the research risky too.

The social location or standpoint constructed by my autoethnography, is also put to use for political purposes. I use my academic privilege to open a space for the voices of youth to be heard, and position myself in relation to them, as an advocate for youth issues. I want this inquiry to contribute to their interests, not only in that I identify with them and speak on their behalf, but also in that I speak for myself in relation to them. I understand that ultimately, my liberation/empowerment is linked to theirs as theirs to mine.

The Question of Interpretation

Additional questions as to the value of my interpretation of our work arise. Does what I have written represent the process in which we engaged? Does it represent what the students had to say? Does it do justice to the participants? How would the students respond to what I have said about them? Given the context of my study and the methods I employed I am compelled to raise questions as to the value and quality of my research.

Students gave their consent to participate in the research. They were informed as to what the Popular Theatre process might entail, and how the information/understanding I gained would be used. Yet, neither they nor I had any way of knowing where our emergent Popular Theatre work and my interpretation would eventually lead. The students participated as co-researchers to some extent, but did my final interpretation, the writing of my doctoral dissertation, do justice to our participatory process? In participatory research, participants are ideally involved in all stages of the process. In this case, only the Popular Theatre aspect of the research was participatory. Students were only minimally involved or consulted regarding the final written document.

I arranged an opportunity for students at the same school where I conducted the research to respond to one level of my interpretation. A year after *"Life in the Sticks,"* I took a collection of scripted descriptions (Saldaña, 2003) that I wrote portraying what we did the previous year back to the school. The descriptions, based on my journals, field notes, student journals, audio and videotapes, were partly transcribed but also partly fictionalized for artistic and/or practical purposes. I drew on these texts in my subsequent interpretive writing.

With the regular drama teacher's permission, when I visited the school the second year, I engaged two of his drama classes in dramatic readings of the scripts and discussion of the issues they raised. Only two of the students in these classes had actually taken part in the research the previous year. These two verified that the incidents described in the scenes had actually occurred. In a more general way, the students who read the scripts indicated recognition, not of specific individuals (though they took pleasure in trying to match the code names with people they knew), but the tone, contexts, situations, character types and voices that were represented. While our readings served to affirm the work at this stage, I regret not having involved research participants more in the interpretative phase, at least to have sought their responses to some of my ideas. Ideally, I envision a group of students participating in, for example, a discourse analysis of my scripted descriptions or even in the scripting process itself. I used my discourse analysis to reframe "at-risk" as risky or resistant youth behaviour. With student participation, would other conclusions have been reached?

As it was, I did not seek out individual students who participated in the project, some of whom may or may not have still been in the school and/or community. I blamed logistical obstacles, the community being a distance from my home, my lack of transportation and the difficulty of tracking down individuals. I was not comfortable seeking out individuals at their homes considering our research agreement had been via the school. I doubted that individual responses to our group process a year later would have yielded any valuable feedback, in any case. I did not put time or energy into trying to get the group together again. As my scripted descriptions were to some extent fictionalized, perhaps "member checks" were not warranted; yet some youth responses to my interpretation of the themes we explored would have been validating. Regrettably, I did not consult any youth in this regard. Furthermore, while I intend to deliver a copy of my completed dissertation to the school as promised, exactly what my ethical obligations are to the research participants/school regarding what I have written is ambiguous. What if my intention to serve the interests of the students, undermines the interests of the school? Where is my ethical obligation then? Having been generously invited to conduct my research at the school, I feel some obligation to respect and uphold the expectations of that school. On the other hand, if I see obstacles to education as "the practice of freedom" (Freire, 1988, p. 15) entrenched in schooling practices, I feel obligated to speak out. It is the institution of schooling rather than this or any particular school to which my criticisms are addressed.

Based in a post-modern belief that "truth" in any case is always only partial, without nullifying the possibility that we can know things about reality and act in the world[4], I do not claim ultimate authority in the topics I discuss. My interpretation draws on what the students revealed through the Popular Theatre, relevant theory and my own experiences as a youth to speculate on the concept "at-risk." By re-framing "at-risk" as risky youth behaviour, risk-taking or edgework[5] (Lyng, 1993), by highlighting the resistant quality of or the enjoyment youth derive from their risky behaviour, my intention is not to provide a descriptive/prescriptive analysis of youth behaviour, but an alternative perspective for consideration. Given the impossibility of speaking for youth as a coherent category based on individuals' shifting identities and multiple contexts, my interpretation is valuable in how it resonates with the experiences of others. Not having inquired into whether the research participants or any youth agree or not with any of the perspectives I present in my final interpretation, is a limitation of my work, worthy of further investigation.

My research speaks for and about youth. Through the participatory, Popular Theatre process, I also spoke "with" youth (Fals-Borda, 1991; Kidd & Byram, 1978). I hope that my interpretation of the experiences students shared does justice to their needs and wishes – addressing youths' interests with respect and caring (Edwards & Mauthner, 2002; Noddings, 1984).

Other Questions of Quality

The criteria for determining the quality of any research depends upon the epistemological framework in which it is set (Denzin, 1997a; Park, 1993). In a recent issue of Qualitative Inquiry (Finley & Mullen, 2003), the conversation is taken up over how to evaluate quality in new paradigm social inquiry and the arts-based forms that have emerged as methods of doing and representing research that respect the commitments of this new paradigm. Finley (2003) presents a valuable retrospective of the ongoing discourse and the emerging bases on which critical human research is being judged[6]. In my reading of Finely, the most widely agreed upon criteria are ethically motivated, socially/politically action oriented and performative. They combine "ethics, aesthetics, political praxis and epistemology" (Denzin, 2000, p. 258). The ethical imperative in new paradigm human inquiry calls for research that embraces an ethics of care, is relational, builds community, allows the voices of participants to be heard, promotes agency, encourages reciprocity between researcher and participants, deepens relationships, allows a blurring of roles, displays the resarcher's positionality, and is culturally responsive, based in context and community. The social/political action orientation emphasizes research that embodies political praxis, is radical in its purpose, useful in the community in which the research was conducted, fights oppressive structures in our everyday lives and moves the reader to action. The performative push encourages research that is creative, passionate, visceral and kinetic, focuses on process over product, is critically reflexive on the part of the researcher, experiments with form including popular arts forms, produces open texts with multiple meanings and multiple ways of relating to the work, allows dialogue with research participants, appeals to diverse audiences and raises questions rather than formulating conclusions. Judgment of quality in new paradigm research using arts-based methods tends towards a blending of form and function and away from prescriptive criteria that apply to art such as writing standards, artistic ability, craftsmanship, or expertism (Finley, 2003). Finley draws on her work with street youth, as I do on my work with youth, to acknowledge that untrained artists are capable of producing powerful arts-based texts.

Finley's (2003) discussion concurs with the way quality is judged in participatory research (Fals-Borda, & Rahman, 1991; McTaggart, 1997; Park, 1993), which was openly ideological from its inception, motivated by political values and goals. In the participatory research tradition quality is realized through producing communal relations characterized by understanding, empathy and connectedness, and as a vehicle for transformation (Park, 1993). Alcoff (1991) too bases quality of research for social justice on the researcher's intentions and its effects of the research in the real world.

In openly ideological research, the degree to which the research leads to insight, activism, empowerment or "conscientization" on the part of participants and audiences has been referred to as its "catalytic validity" (Lather, 1986; Reason & Rowan, 1981). Similarly, Denzin (1997a) has suggested that the legitimacy of any research observation is determined by "the nature of the critical understandings it produces" (p. 8). The study of any given practice, he claims, is significant because "it is an instance of a cultural practice that happened in a particular time and place" (p. 8), producing situated understandings of the event under investigation. A work gains legitimacy through its verisimilitude, in the light it sheds on other truths (Denzin, 1997a).

To some extent, I am reassured of the quality of my research based on the criteria outlined above. Popular Theatre, as a pedagogical approach and a research method is by its nature community-based, relational, socially/politically motivated and performative. The Popular Theatre process in which students and I engaged had the potential to be empowering. The students who participated in the project gained insight in relation to the issues we explored, had the opportunity to voice their perspectives and investigate them within a community of peers, as did the audiences for whom we performed. The action in which our Popular Theatre work culminated were the two performance/workshops that we presented, one for students at the school and another at a neighbouring school. Yet, I am cautious in declaring our work to be effective activism in the real world. How can we know the effects of our work? Any attempt at identifying or measuring empowerment or transformation is problematic at best, the effects being not necessarily observable or short-term, the participants not necessarily having access to or being able to articulate new understandings. I doubt the extent to which any one project can hope to achieve such grand objectives as "empowerment" or "conscientization" in isolation of larger social realities, yet I believe that attempts must be made. As Denzin (2003) urges, we must persist in conducting our "ground-level criticism aimed at the repressive structures of everyday life" (p. 138).

The value of my study overall is perhaps in the critical understandings it produced about the notion "at-risk," about the perceptions of youth, and the practice of Popular Theatre. Then its usefulness is on behalf of youth in acknowledging the injustice in the negative portrayal of "at-risk" youth and the lack of youths' voices in mainstream literature. Ideally, my text presents a counter-hegemonic counter-narrative (Foucault, 1977) – a text that speaks against the grain of or unsettles taken-for-granted beliefs about youth, offering alternatives to envision how things could be different. My discourse has the potential to influence educators (and others) to change the ways they perceive youth and possibly influence policy in relation to youth.

In interrogating the possible negative effects of my interpretation, my greatest fear is that some will see my focus on youths' enjoyment of their risky/resistant behaviour as trivializing the real dangers or potential harm that can result from risky youth behaviour. By enacting and writing about youths' risky experiences, their "bad stories," I hope that I have not done violence by unjustly appropriating them, inadvertently contributing to the portrayal of youth as deviant or damaged (Fine, et al., 2000; Salverson, 1996). Above all, I have sincere concern for the well-being of youth. I want my work to be put to use for this purpose.

Ultimately the quality of my research lies in readers' relations to the text, the extent to which it resonates with their experiences. I want readers to come to know or feel the truths of the stories that my text tells through vicarious experience. My scripted descriptions depicting the work with students are performative texts (Denzin, 1997b) that attempt to evoke situations in the reader's imagination through preserving more of the context, dynamics and voices of participants than other forms of writing can. Ironically, as fictionalized re-constructions of reality (based on journals, field notes, audio and video tapes) they cannot claim to be "true" – as text production is in any case contested (Banks & Banks, 1998), but they succeed in conjuring an impression of the reality I perceived which also resonated with others.

Though I cannot claim to have wholly enacted the ethical commitments of critical human inquiry through my research, in this paper I outline the ways in which I have struggled to find an ethical response to my participants and the research, and the ways in which I strive towards an ethics of care (Edwards & Mauthner, 2002; Noddings, 1984) in the future.

Popular Theatre in a School Context

The potential conflicts of interest that may arise in doing participatory research as part of a doctoral dissertation (as I have already discussed) and in association with other organizations by unwittingly contaminating the participatory process, is a concern (Maguire, 1993). I have misgivings about the legitimacy of ~~doing~~ Popular Theatre within a school/institutional setting[7].

In a critique of Freireian liberatory pedagogy, which originally failed to address questions of authority and power relations in institutional settings, Weiler (1998) describes ways in which feminist educators have confronted the problem of teacher authority through classroom practices that aim to reduce tensions between institutional expectations and feminist ideals. Despite her efforts, Weiler recognized that institutional authority could never be entirely rejected as transference of authority to teachers takes place by students who are socialized to expect the teacher to wield authority and impart knowledge. For Freire (1988/70), a liberatory teacher is seen as a joint learner with students, yet in a letter to North American teachers (Freire, 1987), he acknowledges that as it is unimaginable that teachers not teach some content or other, pedagogy implies that learners "enter into the discourse of the teacher" (p. 213). Thus, the teacher is invested with the authority of greater knowledge and experience. Furthermore, Freire (1987) argues, the presence and authority of the teacher is essential in fostering the discipline needed for a critical understanding of the world. Weiler (1998) too urges feminist educators to claim the authority that society has traditionally denied women. In a positive conception of power/authority, feminist educators assert power for women, legitimate their claim to knowledge, and assist students in becoming theorists of their own lives towards changing the world.

In my work with students, I struggled with the conflict between my roles as teacher and Popular Theatre facilitator/researcher. As teacher my inclination was to instruct, to correct students if their views did not conform to accepted, in my case, critical perspectives. Evident in my scripted descriptions, I was unable to entirely escape the authoritative role of "Teacher." Yet, as Popular Theatre facilitator and participatory researcher I was called upon to open a space for participants to voice *their opinions* and create *their own* meanings. Like Weiler (1998), I searched for practices to reduce the conflict. My opting out of grading students alleviated some of the tension, but further dissonance occurred with regard to the school's expectations for student behaviour. Students were expected to attend regularly, to pay attention in class, to ask permission to leave the room, to use appropriate language and address appropriate subject matter. As a teacher, I was compelled to encourage students whose participation lagged, reprimand students for use of inappropriate language and monitor their movements. Ideally, participants willingly engage in a Popular Theatre process because the issues under investigation are vital to them. Regulation is coercive and antithetical to the goals of empowerment. The participatory research paradigm too strives to alleviate the power differential between researcher and researched, to create subject/subject relationships (Park, 1993). Yet, as teacher authority is deeply entrenched in traditional school structures, any individual teacher's attempts to undo institutionalized roles and expectations are an uphill battle[8]. Furthermore, As Fals-Borda suggests, students may even resist being cast in the role of knowledge producers, being more comfortable with the passive knowledge recipient role that the system has encouraged in them (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991). Even outside institutions, individuals are socialized to pay deference to "leaders" and "experts." In this sense, even the role of Popular Theatre facilitator is invested with the authority of the person in charge.

As such, I question the extent to which our school/classroom environment was conducive to students sharing their life experiences. Students did tell stories and share personal experiences, but I conjecture these were heavily censored, keeping the most dangerous stories well beyond the grasp of the institution. I cautioned students to disclose only what they were willing to have others know and the group to explore. I expect they told only what they were comfortable telling in this context. The first story they shared, for example, was about an incident from the previous year when some students were caught drinking alcohol on a school bus trip. This story was common knowledge within the school community and therefore safe. Other disclosures and valuable exploration of issues followed, but what of the stories that were not told? What important issues did our work avoid/evade? (E.g. Aboriginal issues, young women's issues). With limited willingness to share in a potentially unsafe/institutionalized environment, the efficacy of participatory work is stifled and students' involvement as producers of knowledge limited.

Furthermore, within institutional settings the limits of time, space, money, transportation, conflicting schedules, ideology, etc., limit the possibilities for real transformative action to occur. We had originally intended to present our Popular Theatre workshop to schools in two isolated communities in the school district, known as "the back lakes." When this became logistically impossible, we settled on a school in a neighbouring town whose students had a more privileged (majority White) background. Our presentation there met with success, but the efficacy of our work, I believe, would have been greater in the back lakes.

Throughout this study, I struggled with the power, authority and responsibility that came with the roles of teacher and Popular Theatre facilitator. I agonized over how far I pushed or did not push students and to what extent I imposed my agenda. While I strongly believe there should be spaces for youth to express themselves freely, to take control of the drama for themselves, I concede that within existing institutional settings this is not possible. While the teacher power and authority imposed by institutions cannot ultimately be escaped, and perhaps by our current understandings teacher authority is a necessary element of teaching and learning, I try to imagine other ways of being in pedagogical relations with youth that encourage a critical perspective but do not entail constraining power disparities.

Difficult Issues in the Classroom

In Popular Theatre, by addressing social issues drawn from personal experience there is always the danger of encountering difficult, emotionally charged, risky, or even traumatic issues, sometimes leading to moments of crisis. I have experienced such crisis as a participant/student and facilitator/teacher of Popular Theatre. I have pondered at length over the ethical implications of raising such sensitive subject matter in the classroom, as have others. Felman (1992) writes about a course she taught on testimony and witnessing, which culminated in the viewing videotaped testimonies of Holocaust survivors, putting the class itself in crisis. Felman asks if the process of testimony and bearing witness to a crisis can be made use of in the classroom. She concludes:

> Teaching as such, takes place precisely only through a crisis: if teaching does not hit upon some sort of crisis, if it does not encounter either the vulnerability or the explosiveness of a (explicit or implicit) critical and unpredictable dimension, it has perhaps not truly taught . . . my job as teacher, paradoxical as it may sound, was that of creating in the class the highest state of crisis that it could withstand, without 'driving the students crazy' – without compromising the students' bounds (p. 53).

Others concur, and I would agree, that new knowledge must break through previous frames of reference and individuals' points of vulnerability in relation to how they identify themselves, to enable recipients to transform (Berman, 2001; Bracher, 2000; Jay, 1987). Markham (1998) believes that part of a teacher's job is "to push students slightly out of their comfort zones to expose them to different perspectives in meaningful ways" (p. 92). If aggression signifies a destabilization of "identity formations," he argues, then aggression must sometimes be "a necessary by product" of our educational goals. I believe that unsettling students' comfortable positions, their beliefs about themselves and the world is necessary in teaching for social change, "as we confront harmful or oppressive myths about particular social groups or our own culture," but also, to make use of these destabilizing moments, there is a need to "balance the comfort necessary for openness with the discomfort necessary for change" (Markham, 1988, p. 92-93).

Similarly, the transformational and/or therapeutic effects and associated risks in Popular Theatre have been theorized (Cohen-Cruz & Schutzman, 1994; Prentki, & Selman, 2000; Salverson, 2001). Diamond (1994) quotes a participant describing a Popular Theatre workshop as being "like going down in a dark mine. In the mine we found brilliant diamonds and brought them to the surface – but we had to go into the damp and dark to get them" (p. 36).

Boal's (1979/74) theatre, the form/process which our work was based upon, looks for ways for individuals to confront incidents of oppression in their daily lives as a rehearsal for future action through the spontaneous acting out of situations from an individual's past. There is potential in the improvisation of these situations for something to happen "which can symbolically change [one's] relationships both on the stage and in one's life" (Feldhendler, 1995, p. 96). As Prentki and Selman (2000) suggest, "in the moment of improvisation or performance, there is a sense in which anything can be risked, in which the 'unsayable' can be said, the 'undoable' done and then, if necessary, undone" (p.

146). With these possibilities come inherent risks, the danger of misappropriating someone's story and re-oppression (Salverson, 2001).

However, Popular Theatre is not psychodrama or therapy, which stays focused on the individual. Rather, as a form of sociodrama, it extrapolates from the individual to the group and then to the larger society on the assumption that individuals' experiences of oppression are shaped by larger social forces. In this way, the facilitator must direct participants' attention outward to focus on society's problems, to contextualize the individuals' experiences of oppression within a socio-political reality, and apply political theory to interpersonal relations. In juxtaposing the general and the specific, the facilitator must problematize empathetic feelings, obscure easy answers and question views of reality. The role of the "Joker" is to "create chaos" or establish a "healthy disorder" (Boal, 1995).

In this process, Popular Theatre facilitator Spry (1994) asks participants to be responsible for themselves, to say no to anything they are not prepared to deal with. She believes that if the facilitator "takes on the responsibility for each workshop participant, they are perpetuating a form of progressive paternalism which creates an atmosphere in which the individual participants feel, once again, that they are not in control of their own lives." She quotes Boal, "I care, but I am not responsible for you. I cannot be. I do not know what is right for you" (p. 178).

The value of crisis from a pedagogical perspective lies in the truth it reveals, but is this truth worth the suffering? Though painful, survivors of trauma acknowledge the personal growth, understanding and sense of connection gained from their experience of crisis. For education, which seeks to make use of trauma as pedagogy, this presents an ethical dilemma: Do good intentions and positive outcomes justify causing pain? While there may be indications of inherent risk, there is no way of foreseeing the emotional response that any individual might have to any classroom encounter. In this case, it is the teacher/facilitator's ethical responsibility to help create an environment of safety and trust, in which personal disclosure and risk-taking can occur, and then to pay attention to the emotional well-being of participants. When crisis does occur we must pay reverence to it by attending to the truths that it reveals and use what we learn to work towards ending further suffering. We must find a way to relieve the suffering of trauma without eliminating its truth (Caruth, 1995).

In any high school context, where students are essentially a captive audience, while they may even agree to participate in a Popular Theatre project, they may still be uncomfortable or unwilling to address sensitive subject matter, their agenda being different from that of the facilitator/teacher. The concern then is how far one is willing to push students beyond their comfort zone and how prepared one is to manage the outcomes?

As is common in Popular Theatre, at the beginning of our project we discussed the inherent risks of personal disclosure and exploration of sensitive issues. A series of group building and trust exercises began our work and I spoke with the drama teacher to ensure that counselors were available should they be needed. While our Popular Theatre process did not uncover anything particularly traumatic (no doubt self-censorship served its defensive strategy), there were instances of potentially difficult content, one in particular which may have had a disempowering, if not a traumatic effect. The incident in question began during a Graffiti Wall activity in which students wrote and drew phrases, slogans, expressions, poems, pictures etc. on a large sheet of mural paper to brainstorm around our theme *"Life in the Sticks."* As students were writing, I walked around to observe and comment. The following is an excerpt from one of my scripted descriptions entitled *"The Graffiti Wall:"*

Teacher: What's this Jay? *(reading)* "Women are only good for two things . . . cooking and blow jobs . . ." *(surprised)* Jay, do you really believe that?

Jay: No.

Teacher: Then why would you write it? Sorry, I don't mean to say you shouldn't write it, I'm just interested to know why.

Jay: Leigh and Jezebel dared me.

Teacher: *(To Leigh and Jezebel)* You dared him?

Leigh: No . . . *(Leigh and Jezebel giggle conspiratorially.)*

Jezebel: We meant it as a joke.

Jay: I'll scribble it out.

Teacher: It's okay Jay. You can just leave it. *(He scribbles it out anyway.)*

The comment that Jay wrote and my response had implications for my role as teacher/facilitator. My instinctive response as a "critical" educator was to expose the oppression in Jay's statement. Though it was not my intention to make Jay feel personally responsible for the comment or censor him in any way, this was the effect. Rather, I might have said nothing, allowing responses to Jay's statement unfold on their own. I might have spoken with him and/or the young women about it privately to ascertain their intent. As it was, I worry that the encounter left Jay feeling implicated, which may or may not have contributed to his regularly absenting himself from class beginning not long after. At the time, I did not link my actions to his behaviour. Was this a case of pushing a student beyond his comfort zone?

While students were hesitant to take up the issue of sexism, they had inadvertently raised the issue. This was a time I pushed them to examine an issue I thought we should address. On my suggestion, we collectively devised a scene based on this incident, entitled *"It's Just a Joke,"* exploring various responses (based on students' perspectives) to the comment "Women are only good for two things . . ." The following excerpt is from that scene:

Horse: Hey Jester, what are you doing? *(Jester is spray painting.)*

Smokey: *(reading)* That's a good one . . .

Jester: You think so. Thanks guys.

Horse: . . . but you forgot cooking.

Smokey: Ya, and dishes and laundry. *(Laughter as Jester adds the guys' suggestions to his graffiti.)*

Horse: Here give me that. *(He takes the spray paint from Jester.)* I'm gonna dot the "o's."

(More laughter as Horse sprays two little dots inside the "o's" of "cooking" to represent breasts. Meanwhile two young women enter.)

Sophia: Hey guys, what's so funny?

Smokey: Have a look at Jester's artwork.

Dancer: You guys! *(places a friendly slap on Smokey's shoulder)*

(The women are sort of angry but also sort of laughing.)

Sophia: How can you say such a thing? You guys are so bad.

Horse: Pretty funny though, eh?

Dancer: It's not even funny *(giggling)*.

Sophia: Here give me that. *(also giggling takes the spray paint from Jester and adds to his graffiti.)* Cross out the "wo" and what have you got . . ?

Dancer: Now that's funny! *(Dancer and Sophia look at each other and laugh.)*

Jester: Give me that paint back. *(Takes the paint back and repairs his work.)*

(Everyone laughs. Enter another young woman, Leigh.)

Leigh: *(reading)* What the . . . *(seriously, angrily)* you guys are sick. Give me that. *(She takes the spray paint and paints over the graffiti.)* I can't believe you guys. Not everyone thinks this is funny you know.

(Leigh exits.)

Sophia: What's the matter with her?

Horse: *(innocently)* It's just a joke.

Jester: She doesn't have a sense of humour.

This scene showed how the students felt about the comment, emphasizing the humour over the harm. I hoped that our further explorations might arrive at a more critical perspective, but was unwilling to force my perspective. We presented the scene for the school we visited and elicited further interesting discussion. The conclusions that were collectively drawn included:

> Things can be perceived differently by different people, in this case based on gender.
> A comment can be both sexist and funny at the same time.
> How a comment is interpreted depends on one's relationship to the person making it – whether he/she is a friend or not.
> There is more harm in writing something (in a public place, on a wall) than just saying it.
> Though offence may not be intended, offence may be taken.
> One can't foresee who might be harmed by a comment (e.g. an old lady).

I was satisfied that students had arrived at understandings that both confirmed their experiences and challenged them, if only a little. While at the time I saw their conclusions as weak compromises to the blatantly sexist/oppressive remark, I later acknowledged their observations as astute expressions of the complexity the issue had for them. Juggling my conflicted roles however, interested in education for social justice, I still waver between a feeling of responsibility for having possibly alienated Jay, for pushing an issue I (not they) felt needed to be addressed, versus a feeling that I should have pushed them farther, to unsettle/destabalize their complacent ideas about sexist humour. Moreover, in writing my dissertation, I have recently become aware of an absence of gender differentiation in our work. Is it possible that what motivated the young women to challenge Jay to write the comment on the Grafitti Wall in the first place was more than just a joke? Could it have been an indirect way (conscious or not), the only safe way, of introducing a serious topic? In this case, though my concern for Jay's well being would still be justified, should I have done more to allow the female perspective to be heard?

Silenced Voices

Our Popular Theatre work allowed expression/discussion of many diverse opinions, yet my interpretation of the work in relation to youth experiences primarily focuses on the voices of the majority, the moments of consensus reached by the group. Our participatory project made use of the emancipatory advantages of group process, especially for marginalized communities, in allowing communal expression of their reality, collective analysis, and the sense of hope this provides (de Roux, 1991; Fals-Borda, 1991; Fine & Weis, 2000; Fine, et al., 2000). Yet, the notion of community consensus is also controversial.

Reason and Rowan (1981) warn against "consensual collusion" which they claim restricts the potential of collaborative work by defending anxieties, sustaining tacit norms and limiting areas of experience. Neelands (1984) argues that collective drama avoids consensus, rather allowing "conspectus," which he defines as conveying a synopsis of opinions, including differences. Through conspectus, Neelands claims, individual reactions and opinions are meshed or patterned into shared experience. Others have found the notion of consensus problematic in that it can disempower or silence individual, dissenting voices (Diamond, 1992; Yuval-Davis, 1997). In our work, two dissenting voices made themselves heard only at the very end of our process. While I cannot go back to repair the harm that not attending to them might have caused, I hope that giving voice to them here might compensate in some small way.

Following are excerpts from two students' final journal entries that disturbed me. The first is by a young man, an active participant, who worked well with the group, took part in activities, contributed to discussions, took on roles in the devising and animation processes, yet whose comments indicate that he felt slighted:

> The past month has been pretty damn boring. I didn't like the collective on "Life in the Sticks." I thought it could have been funnier. I thought what we did was just "eh." I had a few ideas but I couldn't get them across because the "Teacher" didn't listen to me. But that's alright, I still had some fun, the field trip was okay . . .

While I believe that this comment was partly meant to rib me (he code named himself Joker, indicated his appreciation of fun, and excused my not listening to him quite readily), I am obliged to acknowledge the seriousness of what he had to say. While I felt confident that our process had provided opportunities for all to share what they wanted to share (within their boundaries of disclosure in the given context), here was a student who claimed to have not been heard. If it was so, I am appalled that our work might have been oppressive towards him and regret that the group missed his contribution. What might I/we have done differently to open the space for his and other silenced voices to be heard? This question is also raised by the next example, problematizing, despite our efforts, the possibility of creating a sense of community that is open and receptive to all:

> It was a good experience . . . I would rather work with a different class like at least with one of my friends in the class, but like I would say, the more people the better . . . but everyone was kinda mean to me. But hey, drama is part of my life . . . [she talks generally about getting over stage fright and the need for confidence] . . . Diane rushes people to do things. That's a good thing though. She gets your courage up . . . Drama is saying you can do it . . . have fun . . . no put downs.

This young woman had positive things to say about her experience (was she being kind by saying what she thought I wanted to hear?), but the negative undertones spoke loudly. As an outside observer, I would not have described her experience as a particularly positive one. She clearly had trouble fitting in with the group, was a reluctant participant, preferring to sit on the sidelines watching, contributing little. On several occasions, I encouraged/coaxed her to participate in activities. While I did not want to push her too hard, the question of how hard to push being always contentious, I could not allow her to do nothing. She had opted to take part in the project, and from a Popular Theatre perspective non-participation is also problematic. While a facilitator is in no position to coax participants to contribute, neither is the role of passive spectator encouraged. While she suggested that my pushing her was a good thing, I did not feel comfortable pushing, nor did she seem to me to enjoy being pushed at the time.

While I did not observe anyone being particularly mean to her, neither were they particularly friendly. (Does the nonchalant way she talks about others being mean to her indicate resignation, defeat?) I was concerned that she was not fully benefiting from the drama experience and inquired about her to the drama teacher. I knew there was a problem, but really did nothing to address it. She was one of those students who, in the group, faded into the background – not really participating, but not disrupting either, so left to herself. Confronted with her journal entry, my neglect became apparent. I regret not having spoken with her about what I/we could have done to make her experience more positive.

The young woman's location on the fringes of the group, her suggestion that people were mean to her (implying intentional alienation/exclusion by other students) raises serious concerns about the nature of the so-called "community" in which we were working. Clearly, the animosities, biases and complacencies that students and teachers bring with them to the classroom cannot be undone by well-intentioned drama activities alone. This speaks further to my concerns regarding the possibility of doing genuine Popular Theatre in a school context, or rather the need for schools to change to make it possible.

Conclusion

Doing Popular Theatre with students in a school context as a pedagogical undertaking and research methodology raised a number of ethical conundrums and contradictions, which I have attempted to address here with attention and sensitivity. While I realize that ethical tangles are not undone by examining them in retrospect, and that some contradictions can never be solved, I hope that through self-reflexivity a move towards more ethical practice in the future is possible. While I cannot claim to have fully enacted a pedagogy of difference (McLaren, 1994; Weiler, 1998) and an ethics of caring (Edwards & Mauthner, 2002; Noddings, 1984) in my work with students, this study has offered me a better sense of what is meant by respecting difference, acknowledging uncertain/unstable meanings, and being in empathic relation with others. Ultimately, I hope that this research has addressed my ethical commitment to furthering the cause of justice for youth and to suggesting the need to create spaces in schools where participatory processes are possible.

Notes

[1] Participatory research stresses the inherent capacity for participants to create knowledge based on their experiences (see Fals-Borda, & Rahman, 1991; McTaggart, 1997; Park, 1993).

[2] For example, the label "Rez boys" was written on our graffiti wall but never followed up on through our storytelling or scene creation, though it might very well have been. We also talked about valuing nature and the hunting and fishing available in the rural community. These are traditionally Aboriginal values/pursuits, but were not identified in relation to Native culture as such. Hunting and fishing are also favourite pursuits of rural Alberta Whites. Perhaps the rural environment provided a common bond for these youth across racial lines. The issue of poverty was also raised in relation to the rural environment, not specific to race. During a small group interview towards the end of the process, when a student asked me directly, "Why are you here?" I spoke of my interest in working with so-called "at-risk" youth and that Native students were among those most often labeled "at-risk." This led to a brief discussion of discrimination and stereotyping of Native people.

[3] The artifacts include friends' comments from the inside cover my high school yearbook, my grade 12 sociology project on parent-teen conflict, a one-act play I wrote in grade 13 about two young men (possibly "at-risk"?), and a date book recording illicit incidents in the lives of my friends and I.

[4] McLaren's (1994) notion of critical or resistance postmodernism draws on postmodernism's critique of power, authority and truth, and maintains an agenda of social change – theory in action.

[5] Elsewhere in my interpretative work I re-frame "at-risk" based on my Popular Theatre work with students as risky or risk-taking behaviour which youth engage in by choice giving them back a sense of agency in their own behaviour. I highlight the enjoyment they gain from such behaviour and its rebellious or resistant quality. I also question the motivation behind their choices. Lyng's (1993) social psychological theory of voluntary risk taking was first applied to extreme sports such as skydiving, bridge jumping and motorcycle racing, but also to criminal behavior and adolescent risk-taking. Edgework emphasizes the subject's experience of the activity as a kind of "experiential anarchy" – self-created opportunities for spontaneous action in response to social constraints.

[6] New paradigm research is differentiated from research set in the scientific paradigm which has traditionally been evaluated on the basis of validity, reliability, generalizability, etc. Finley (2003) reviews the ongoing conversation regarding criteria for judging quality in new paradigm research including emerging arts-based approaches. She reviews the work of numerous contributors to Qualitative Inquiry over its seven year history including Tom Barone, Arthur P. Bochner, Patricia Clough, Norman K. Denzin, Elliot Eisner, Carolyn Ellis, Susan Finley, Yvonna Lincoln, Ernest Lockridge, Carol Mullen, Peter Reason, Laurel Richardson, Clive Seale, William Tierney and others.

[7] I have since done a Popular Theatre project at a Young Offender Centre. Here the conflict of perspective between the participants and the institution was very overt. The centre stipulated that our drama work should not promote or glorify criminal behaviour. We were forced to negotiate a fine line between honestly portraying the inmates' experiences, which often included portrayals of criminal activities, and the constraint to not promote or glorify this behaviour.

[8] In my post-secondary teaching in drama education over the past three years I have made further headway searching for practices that redistribute power, (undermine traditional teacher power/authority) and still stay within institutional expectations. Such practices include using a speaking object to more equitably share opportunities to speak in class, sitting in a circle, negotiating and re-negotiating grading contracts with students, encouraging student input into grading practices.

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. . . Another of the ethical conundrums which entangled me on my way through the research landscape is the basis for Paper 9, "The Ethics & Efficacy of Mimesis in Youth Performance in and out of School." At my master's defense, Dr. jan jagodzinski asked me a question about the aesthetic concept mimesis that I was unable to answer. A subsequent investigation into "mimesis" led me to performance theory. I struggled with the serious ethical implications of mimesis in relation to my work and to my surprise, what emerged from the struggle was a powerful way of viewing risky or resistant youth behaviour as mimetic performance . . .

Paper 9: The Ethics & Efficacy of Mimesis in Youth Performance in and out of School

Mimesis is defined as the human faculty for imitating or representing reality[1]. As an aesthetic concept, mimesis has been a matter of contention since antiquity. Plato (trans. 1987) condemned mimesis as mere imitation or faking, for creating illusions and falsifying reality. Aristotle (trans. 1996) denounced mimetic representation of human attributes that were base or unworthy, believing rather that art should embody the perfectibility of humankind. In the twentieth century, mimesis in association with dramatic realism was criticized for its uncritical portrayal of reality (Benjamin, 1986; Brecht, 1964/1957). Instead, Brecht proposed a mode of interpretation that made use of mimesis for dialectical ends. More recently, along the same lines, Popular Theatre practitioners and performance ethnographers, amongst others, have taken up the perils and promises of mimesis. In this paper, I explore the limitations and potential in the mimetic performances of youth in relation to a Popular Theatre project I facilitated for my doctoral research.

With an interest in better understanding the experiences of youth that might deem them "at-risk," I engaged a group of high school drama students in a rural Alberta community of majority Aboriginal population[2], in doing Popular Theatre to identify and examine issues that they identified as relevant to their lives. Popular Theatre, as a process of theatre for personal and social transformation (Prentki & Selman, 2000), was the performance-based, participatory method that students and I employed to investigate their experiences.

Our Popular Theatre project entitled *"Life in the Sticks,"* based on students' initial claim that their issues were determined by their rural environment, and my subsequent interpretation of our work, raised many ethical concerns for me as an educator/researcher for social justice. The kinds of performances that occur in Popular Theatre (and performance-based research methods) are characterized by their intentions of efficacy in the real world over their entertainment value. Based on participants' own experiences, such performances are, at best, empathic, vulnerable, and open to dialogue (Conquergood, 1985). At worst, even with the best of intentions, performances based on incidents from participants' lives can re-oppress (Salverson, 2001).

Appropriately, Salverson (1996, 2001), and other Popular Theatre practitioners (see also Cohen-Cruz & Schutzman, 1994; Prentki & Selman, 2000) raise concerns over the ethics of performing the experiences of others and ourselves. By creating opportunities for exploration of issues through performance or "acting out" in order to affect change, casting participants as researchers investigating their own experiences, Popular Theatre performances often depict instances of powerlessness, victimization or oppression. Participants' difficult or "bad stories" (Fine, et al., 2000), are investigated for the critical understandings they can impart. The concern lies in the danger of unjustly appropriating these stories. Merely mimetic performances can do more harm than good. How can one ethically take on the role of, act out or put on stage one's own or another's life? How can we do justice to the lives/experiences that we represent? How can performance be an ethical act? What are the ethical responsibilities of actors, facilitators and/or researchers of such performances?

Critical performance ethnographers (Conquergood, 1985, 1998; Fabian, 1990; Turner, 1982; Turner & Turner, 1982) have raised similar concerns. Performance ethnographers study instances of cultural performance including cultural rituals, games, storytelling, theatre and dance; also social dramas such as moments of conflict in everyday life, everyday interactions, the performance of social roles, and performative speech acts, for their cultural understandings. They also participate in cultural performances, and/or represent their findings through performance. Epistemologically, according to Conquergood (1985), performance is an embodied, empathic way of knowing and "deeply sensing the other," through which ethnographers search for an ethical relationship to the individuals and subject matter involved.

Popular Theatre theorist Salverson (1996) and several performance ethnographers articulate their concerns in relation to the concept of mimesis. Mimesis becomes an ethical problem when the lives of others, including their difficult experiences, are performed without the appropriate care and attention. To summarize conclusions drawn by those who have explored this precarious terrain, to avoid the appropriation of others' lives, the romanticization of pain or re-victimization through performance, the relationship between participants and the subject matter portrayed must be one of identification, but not facile identification (Conquergood, 1985; Salverson, 1996). Too easy an identification trivializes the differences of the other, which Diamond (1992) calls enacting violence of the "we." The relationship should not be one of guilt, pity or empathy alone. Rather, the self of the actor/facilitator/researcher should also be implicated in the instances being portrayed. The relationship should include responsibility, obligation, reciprocity and intervention. Popular Theatre practioners/participants and researchers who make use of the "bad stories" of informants must avoid voyeurism in the telling of them (Fine, et al., 2000). They must be careful not to use the "bad stories" and then simply discard them. Rather we must take on the responsibility of performance – its efficacy in the real world.

Interested in acquiring experiential insight, yet maintaining ethical relationships, performance ethnographers turn away from crude mimesis in their understanding of performance. As outlined by Conquergood (1992), early ethnography regarded the notion of mimetic performance in social life as simple imitation or faking (Goffman, 1997), ultimately sustaining an opposition between what was valued as "reality" and what was only a matter of "appearance." This view of mimesis was rejected as having a domesticating effect. Turner (1982) re-conceptualized social drama and cultural performance not as mimesis, but as poiesis – a creative "re-making." For him and scholars who followed (e.g. performative speech act theory, Austin, 1975) the construction of culture and identity through performance was at the very heart of social life and human nature. Performance was appreciated for its productive capacities.

After Turner, the concept of cultural performance took on a political focus. Tyler (1987) argued for a performative theory of representation that priviledged "kinesis" over "mimesis," emphasizing its capacity for intervention, struggle and transformation. Boal (1979/74) regarded performance as a means to change and re-create social reality. From a postcolonial perspective, Bhabha (1994) too saw the potential in performance as a "breaking and re-making," referring to discursive acts that interrupted or undermined master-discourses.

Seeing the potential of performance as kinesis, Conquergood (1985) calls for "dialogical performance" as a moral act, bringing together self and other in a diversity of voices and viewpoints, holding in tension the binary oppositions of identity/difference, and commitment/detachment, leaving every nuance open to interpretation and questioning. In the same spirit, Salverson (2001) calls for a re-playing of real life events in Popular Theatre in such as way as to avoid the potential harm it holds. This involves performing multiple variations of an event, not a reductive but an active process. This kind of kinesis, not simple mimesis, characterizes ethical performance in Popular Theatre.

With its focus on personal and social transformation, Popular Theatre has the potential to enact kinesis through dialogical performance. The Forum Theatre form (Boal, 1979/74; 1992) that we employed in *"Life in the Sticks"* allowed students' lived experiences to be adapted/interpreted for performance, acted and re-enacted with various performers taking various roles, in search of alternative responses. One of our stated intentions was to consider alternatives to our taken-for-granted understandings in relation to the issues raised.

The stories that students told included some "bad stories" involving instances of their risky behaviour, rule breaking, substance use and interpersonal conflict. Their stories were not as difficult or dangerous as those of the refugees with whom Salverson (2001) worked, so the threat of re-victimization was not as great. Elsewhere, I have questioned the ethics of introducing potentially dangerous or difficult subject matter into the classroom setting, concluding that within an environment of safety and trust in education for social justice, there is a need to destabilize, to some extent, students' comfortable identity positions and beliefs about the world (Felman, 1992; Markham, 1998).

I also questioned the extent to which the restrictive school context, and in our case the fact that the teachers of the Aboriginal students, myself included, were mostly White, limited their willingness or comfort to disclose. Likely, self-censorship served a defensive strategy to keep students' most dangerous stories well out of the reach of the institutional grasp, including stories in relation to their Aboriginal identity. This is itself an ethical concern, which casts doubt on the safety of the classroom context for addressing genuinely significant issues and on the ultimate efficacy of our work. Within this uncertain context, even without the most dangerous stories being told, our work called for a responsible approach, to ensure the emotional safety of individual participants, an attitude of sensitivity to the subject matter under exploration, while negotiating the critical edge needed to move from mimetic to kinetic performance.

Students' many perceptive interventions throughout our dramatic process and in their journal responses, attested to their engagement in the critical dialogue that did take place through performance, but I question the extent to which our dialogue was truly transformative. No doubt limited by my relative inexperience as a facilitator at the time, I am uncertain as to the extent to which our performances were kinetic, or even how/when one can identify performances as such, the effects of our actions being not necessarily observable or short-term, the participants not necessarily having conscious access to or being able to articulate new understandings. I can only speculate on the efficacy of any of our performative interactions.

There were undoubtedly mimetic qualities to our performances. I suspect that students shared or acted out what they thought appropriate, were willing to, or wanted to disclose in the given context. The first story they shared, for example, was about an incident that occurred at the school the previous year, in which many of the students in the class were involved, when some students were caught drinking alcohol on a school bus trip. This story was common knowledge within the school community and therefore safe, while still addressing our theme *"Life in the Sticks."* Our exploration of this scene and the issues it raised elicited some valuable insight, but to what extent did students tell what they thought I wanted to hear or go along with the activity based on expectations of the school context, without making themselves open and vulnerable to the experiences we were examining? Were our investigations relegated to a surface examination of issues without ever hitting on the issues that were the most significant? What were the stories that were not told? (Issues related to their Aboriginal identity/culture did not come up. Our explorations were mostly undifferentiated on the basis of gender.) Was this because students were unconscientized, unwilling or did not feel safe enough in that setting? Were mimetic representations all that were possible in this context?

I also acknowledge the possibility that students said or acted-out what they did largely based on the entertainment value it had for their peers. Entertainment seemed high on their agenda, especially for several young men in the group primarily interested in being funny. Their critique of our work often suggested that our scenes were not funny enough. Was this resistant behaviour? Did they make use of our class activity for their own purposes? Or both?

The following excerpt from a series of scripted descriptions that I wrote depicting our work shows an intervention by one student who code-named himself Frootloop. We devised a scene based on a story students told about conflict in a friendship relationship. The scene was set in Lucky's truck and involved an argument between Lucky and his girlfriend Flower. Flower wanted to party with her male friend Smokey who was in town visiting (and whom they had just picked up), rather than spend the Friday evening with her boyfriend as usual. In the Forum Theatre (Boal, 1979/74) intervention phase of our work, in search of alternative strategies for resolving the conflict, Frootloop replaced the boyfriend character to try out his idea:

Frootloop: I'm gonna play Lucky.

Teacher: Okay, Frootloop . . . Now you're still the same characters remember . . . although we've tried out several interventions . . . you're still the same character as in the original scene . . .

Frootloop takes a seat behind the steering wheel of the imaginary truck and continues the scene.

Frootloop: Alright . . . this is the way I see it . . . *(Flower and Smokey are still talking amongst themselves.)* just listen to me for a minute . . . shhhh! *(when the others have quieted down)* I have a little sister . . . she's pretty nice . . . I say we all go to the lounge for a couple hours . . . then we go to the video store and back to my place. Well this guy's a guy and she's a girl . . . you know what I mean . . .

For the first few seconds the other actors in the scene are speechless in disbelief, caught by surprise. The audience is laughing. Smokey can hardly believe his luck that Flower's boyfriend wants to set him up with his sister. He gives Frootloop the thumbs up. Flower, however, looks very uncomfortable.

Smokey: Good call . . . I like this guy's style . . . Let's go pick up your sister!

As well as enthusiasm from Smokey, Frootloop's offering up his sister to his girlfriend's friend got an uproarious response from the audience, which I suspect was Frootloop's primary intention. His intervention had the potential to resolve the conflict in a perverse sort of way, but after addressing Flower's discomfort, the group ultimately rejected the solution as unrealistic on the grounds that brothers are usually more protective of their little sisters. They agreed that Frootloop should introduce one of his female friends to Smokey instead. Whether or not it was Frootloop's intention to be funny, it got a laugh, but it also had broader implications, which the group raised. As the meanings of any performance are in any case multiple, Frootloop's suggestion was taken up, if only briefly, as an opportunity for dialogue about relationships between siblings, which had kinetic potential.

At times like these, I believe, our performances did approach kinesis. At least they engaged students in dialogue leading to more dynamic understandings of the incidents portrayed. Often, however, the performances seemed merely mimetic – playful and exaggerated. Were these only shallow, amusing, mimetic portrayals that risked perpetuating taken-for-granted beliefs about youth behaviour? Is this all they were?

Alternately, it has been suggested that even mimetic performances can have transformative/subversive potential. According to Taussig (1993), "mimetic excess [a reflexive awareness as to the mimetic faculty] provides access to understanding the unbearable truths of make-believe as the foundation of an all-too-seriously serious reality, manipulated but also manipulatable . . . [permitting] the freedom to live reality as really made-up" (p. 255).[3]

While I do not suggest that all student behaviour bears mimetic excess nor that students are necessarily able to articulate their manipulation of the mimetic faculty, I do believe they were/are capable of it. In our improvised drama work students did put performances to use for their own purposes (for fun and/or safety, for example). Based on my experience doing drama with youth on this occasion and others[4], improvisational drama by its nature seems particularly suited to providing space for mimetic excess. I suggest that giving me, as teacher/facilitator what I wanted, what was appropriate in the school context, disclosing only what they were comfortable or wanted to disclose, and/or performing in order to get a laugh involved astute manipulation of the mimetic faculty. Furthermore, within a school/institutional context, from the perspective of students who identified themselves as sometimes at odds with its authority[5], this behaviour did have subversive potential – if not aimed at the school structures explicitly, it did serve to undermine the domesticating effects of the institution.

Scott's (1990) *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, speaks to this issue. Through documented examples from peasant uprisings, slave rebellions, working-class culture, gender relations, prisons and classrooms - wherever relations of domination and subordination have traditionally existed, Scott shows how subordinated peoples throughout history have resisted incorporation by the dominant ideology through their seemingly insignificant performative acts and the subversive potential of their acts to protest their oppression against the odds. Undermining mainstream theory, which depicts marginalized peoples as passive, naïve or falsely conscious, Scott acknowledges covert or low-profile forms of performative resistance such as footdragging, pilfering, grumbling, conning, and gossiping as the "infrapolitics" of the powerless who do not have the luxury of direct confrontation. Fabian (1990) too reminds us of the performance of subordination that oppressed groups have had to resort to throughout history as a means for survival, and the way popular arts, including performance, have been used in countries under colonialism/oppression as "a cover for asserting creativity, independence and critique" (p. 56).

As Scott (1990) suggests, we cannot take the public behaviour of those over whom we have power at face value. In my assessment, the resistant behaviours of the subordinated peoples that Scott describes are consistent with some of my students' behaviour. "Infrapolitics," I have come to suspect, were at the root of the mimetic performances my students offered in the classroom. Moreover, could it be that student behaviour that is resistant to schooling, and risky or resistant youth subcultural behaviour in general, the very behavior that is said to put students "at-risk," are instances of infrapolitical, mimetic performance? Through their "at-risk" behaviour, do youth appropriate (tacitly or deliberately) the portrayal of "deficiency" and "deviancy" of "at-risk" in mainstream literature – behaviour that has them failing and dropping out of school? Is their risky behaviour a mimetic performance in response to the image of youth constructed by the moral majority and/or the media? Do they do it just because they want to or is there some deeper motivation? To what extent does their mimetic behaviour have subversive potential? As Ferrell (1995) suggests, is there potential in resistant youth behaviour to undermine existing social arrangements and create new ones in the lives of youth?

Scott (1990) insists that infrapolitics are real politics aimed at a re-structuring of current power relations. If only as tacit responses to relations of domination/subordination in a search for dignity and autonomy, perhaps youth's resistant acts have the potential, ultimately to undermine/transform unjust social relations. The ethics and efficacy of viewing risky or resistant youth behaviour as mimetic performances calls for a change in the way adults/teachers perceive youth and implies a critique of current schooling practices and the social structures that support them.

Notes

[1] According to Diamond (1997), based on A. Rorty, neither "imitation" nor "representation" fully capture the meaning of mimesis. Mimesis is somewhere between.

[2] I find the label "at-risk" extremely problematic. It is used in mainstream literature in education, health care and criminal justice to talk about youth who already have or are at risk of failing, dropping out of school and being unemployed/able, in danger of behaviour related medical problems, injury or death, in trouble with the law or engaged in criminal activity. The fact that the label portrays "at-risk" youth, their families and communities as somehow deficient or deviant is a problem that my research attempts to address. I am particularly disturbed by the way in which being an "at-risk" youth in Alberta highly correlates with being Aboriginal. Tragically, among the youth deemed "at-risk" with whom I have worked in the inner-city, a young offender center, this rural community and communities in the Northwest Territories, a large percentage have been Aboriginal.

[3] This sort of mimetic excess, I suggest, is evident in all sorts of subcultural activities such as rap music, gangs, drug culture, drag, lesbian porn, S&M, and as I will argue, risky or resistant youth behaviour.

[4] I recently did a Popular Theatre project with a group of boys at a Young Offender Centre where the constraints of the institution were even more strongly felt and the subversive potential of the boys' performances even more strongly enacted. Clearly, the institution recognized the subversive potential in their performances as they stipulated that our work was not to glorify or promote

criminal behaviour. The boys' performances exploring their experiences, however, as might be expected, often included images of criminal activity, which the boys found most amusing. This left my co-facilitator and I negotiating a fine line between glorifying this kind of behaviour and portraying it in order to seriously examine its implications.

[5] In our exploration of the bus trip incident students suggested that the authorities found out about the illicit behaviour because one of their peers had informed on them. They expressed loathing of informers or "rats" as they called them, identifying themselves at odds with the authority of the school.

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. . . I might have chosen to view students' resistant behaviour - the way some students always go for the laugh, or do not come to class at all, as disruptive, a problem to be solved. Instead, I chose to see the potential for change in youths' risky or resistant performative acts. The students with whom I worked made use of our improvised drama activities for their own purposes, often just to have fun. As Joker, I too made use of the academic exercises of research and dissertation writing for my own purposes . . .

. . . In putting my passion for drama to use in my ongoing quest for social justice, I encountered Popular Theatre. My Popular Theatre journey has been an inspiring one, spurred by moments of remarkable possibility that I experienced in the process. In my quest for learning about, doing and facilitating Popular Theatre, the project with students, "Life in the Sticks," and my reflections on it have been a step forward. I was new to Popular Theatre when I undertook the project. I have learned much since, but I still feel like a mere beginner. Popular Theatre I realize, in its significant potential as a pedagogical approach and/or research method, also presents many challenges. Among the questions for which I continue to seek answers are: What is the right relationship between the Popular Theatre facilitator and participants? How can the facilitator manage involvement in the process without exercising too much control? What is the right relationship between the facilitator and the content of the work? How can the facilitator avoid influencing the work with her/his implicit agenda? How can the facilitator manage personal critical beliefs with conflicting participant understandings?

How can we as facilitators evaluate the impact of our work when the outcomes are not necessarily observable, immediate or easily articulated? The journey continues . . .

The study also addressed my smoldering interest, in better understanding the concept "at-risk" and its implications, rooted in the day-to-day challenge of having worked with youth who were deemed "at-risk." What I learned about risky youth behaviour, based on our Popular Theatre work and related theory, offered confirmation of what I already knew tacitly. What was uncanny in this process was the emergent way in which my own stories of risky youth behaviour demanded to be heard. My research, I came to realize, had deep personal implications that I did not initially acknowledge. I had a need to make sense of my experiences as a youth; the research process helped me reach an understanding with my past.

I now have alternative perspectives, including the reminder from my past, from which to raise further questions around what motivates risky youth behaviour and how education, Popular Theatre in particular, can help alleviate its detrimental effects and provide possibilities for change. I know that as I continue to work with youth, including my most recent work with incarcerated youth, more questions and challenges will arise. I feel more prepared to tackle them. I trust that the articles presented in this dissertation will also provide readers with new ways of understanding the label "at-risk," perhaps unsettling some of their taken-for-granted understandings about youth and youth behaviour. I hope that the re-positioning of "at-risk" in my study and the critique it implies *for the institution of schooling and the social structures that uphold it might have some influence on educators and policy makers towards greater justice for youth.*

The intentions of my research to promote social justice have allowed the perspectives of youth to be heard, attempted to initiate positive change in the lives of the youth with whom I worked, and endeavored to undermine the oppressive structures of schooling. My research and writing too have been "infra-political" acts that I hope contribute in their own petty ways to the ultimate transformation of society. From my privileged position as academic, I am committed to working towards a more just and equitable reality for all. Despite the many obstacles and the realization that the ideal may never be achieved, I strive towards enacting positive change in the concrete lived realities of individuals and their communities.

May all our resistant performative acts add to "the accumulation of petty acts [which] can, rather like snowflakes on a steep mountainside, set off an avalanche." (Scott, 1990, p. 192)

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